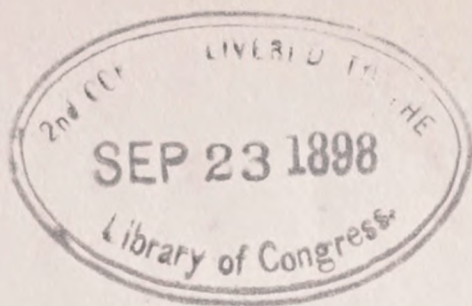


# THE HOLLANDS







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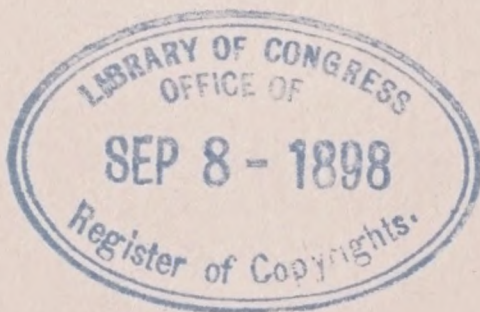
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# THE HOLLANDS.

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## CHAPTER I.

“WAIT a moment, wait a moment, Ross, and I shall stop crying and be brave again.”

The voice, a young one, and smitten through and choked and half-smothered by some sharp pain, but a voice that still gave you faith in it, — in a power behind that would assert itself and redeem its promise.

Then the answer came, — a man's voice this time, yet with some subtle family likeness to the other, shaken a good deal, so that you felt rather than heard the inward struggle that it mastered.

“Well, Jessamine, I'll give you another chance. It isn't too late yet. Say the word, and I'll throw up the whole thing and stay with you. But you know what an awful fact this poverty is, what it has been to us all our lives. It sickens me now to remember it, — one long, wearing struggle to make both ends meet, and keep up a show of decent appearance and of the old family respectability when the means had all melted away. Just think for a moment of our mother's poor, worn, anxious face; it looked quieter and happier in



the coffin than I ever saw it anywhere else, and I just thought to myself then, 'Poor heart! you won't be harrowed any more about the rent, nor have that dreadful hunted look in your eyes which I remember all my boyhood, as quarter day drew near. The little, low roof over your head now won't cost anything!'"

He paused a moment here, and the other voice sobbed in between:—

"All that's over now, Jessamine, for her, but for us it's the old story again, for a number of years, at least. There's no help for it. I've looked the thing fairly in the face, turned it round on every side. It will be only the old strain and scramble, wearing out youth and hope for each of us. It's a long, hard pull for a fellow in the city without friends or influence of any sort, and there would be years of drudgery at some clerkship on a pittance of a salary, before I could provide you or myself with a comfortable home and beat the wolf from the door. But, Jessamine, you're all I've got in the world now, and come to the point, it's so tough to leave you, that, if you say the word, I'll give it all up and stay here, and do the best I can."

This time the pause was longer, and into it there came no sobs. There were struggling breaths though. You knew she was girding up her soul to speak.

"I dare not tell you to stay, Ross. It is true all that you have said. It seems to me, though, now that the time of parting has come, that it would be easier to live in a garret and on a crust with you than in a palace without you!"



"I don't think it would quite come to that, Jessamine," — with a smile, half-bitter, half-sorrowful, on the freshly-bearded lip.

That was his weakest moment. I think just then Ross half wished that Jessamine would bid him stay.

Perhaps the girl dimly discerned it; but, young as she was, she had a conscience, and a will that obeyed it. Her inmost self had spoken in those words, "I do not dare tell you to stay." It was right Ross should go. If he stayed, all the best possibilities of his future might be paralyzed. So, though this parting tugged at her heartstrings, held in it some of the bitterness of death, she would not bid him stay. Give the girl credit for it. Of such stuff are the real men and women made, whether they stand in high places or low, whether the world knows them or not.

"To the garret and the crust?" — trying to return his smile playfully, but making a pitiful failure of it. "But it would come to the long, slow toil and wasting of youth and life, which, in the end, would be harder to bear than to know you are so far away from me. I see there is no place for you near me, Ross, and, after all, it is God's world there as much as here."

The momentary weakness had slipped from the youth's soul too.

"So good-by, Jessamine. You and I know all that is locked up in those words."

A sudden blenching, a scared look on her face, — "Is it quite time?"

"Yes, the train will be along in half an hour. I



thought it best to make this as short as possible for both of us, so I did not get in sooner. Will you walk over to the depot with me ? ”

She saw that he asked this for her sake, not his own. “ No, Ross, I could not have all that loud, coarse crowd staring at us when I spoke the last word, — had the last kiss like this. Good-by.” Her arms tight about his neck, — her warm, clinging kisses on his lips.

“ Good-by, little sister ; oh, good-by ! ” His face was working, his very breath coming in hot gasps now. He would break down if he stayed another minute. There was a small lounge in the room. He laid her right down on that, as if she had been a baby, her face away from him, and rushed out of the room, — out of the house, going to — life or death ; all that would be as God willed.

Jessamine Holland lay there a while as her brother had left her. It seemed that she would never have life enough to get up again, except when she felt those dreadful stabs of pain that doubled her all up like swift blows. Once in a while she wrung her hands in a sudden spasm of ache, when she looked out to the future, and saw the long, slow, desolate years before he would come again ; he, Ross, the only one of her race, the only thing, too, she really loved on earth.

“ How much better it would have been if they could only have died,” she thought in the hot, passionate anguish of her youth, “ than to be on different sides of the world ! ”

Suddenly she heard the car-whistle, — that long, sharp



cry, that, familiar as it may be, never comes to you in certain moments, in soft twilights and dead wastes of midnight, without seeming like the cry of some wild, maddened thing in pain and terror. Jessamine Holland sprang up and rushed out. Betwixt the hills there was a bend just before they entered the gorge, where one might get a glimpse of the cars. In a moment they came thundering along. She snatched off a little crimson scarf she wore and shook it in the air. Ross would know just where to look for the house. In a moment she caught sight of his figure on the platform. She could discern it plainly, though he was half a mile away. He took off his hat, swung it in the air; and the long train glided out of her gaze into the hollow, and Jessamine Holland stood there all alone.

The house behind her was a kind of compromise between a cottage and a farm-house. It was old; but there had been evident attempts to restore it, — at least, give it a certain appearance of homely comfort. The color was a reddish-brown, dingy with years. A low veranda across the front had evidently been an after-thought.

It was an afternoon late in October, the air warm, damp, and still, the sky smothered all up in gray, opaque-looking clouds. There had been terrible frosts that year, — you saw all that by the withered leaves and grasses; they had lain in the grasp of death, and no warmth and light now could stir them out of the torpor; still it seemed that the air had lapsed into a faint dream of her vanished summer, — a mild, moist, still autumn afternoon that had something pleasant and soothing in it,



waiting between the frosts and the Indian summer. The landscape which stretched away from the veranda was a pleasant one, with no marked individuality. In the distance the hills rose to the horizon, bearing great pastures half way up to their summits. Nearer there was a narrow river, with its dark tannery, and its mills and roads sloping here and there, after a picturesque, incoherent fashion, as country roads mostly do. The town lay on either side of the river, and the rusty cottage perched on the top of the hill took in most of it; the stores, and the dwelling-houses, and the great town hall, and the little brown depot perched on one side, — a pleasant, wide, airy scene, but with no especial power nor grouping of anything to strike an artist. This girl, Jessamine Holland, standing on the veranda, is the central point in the picture for you and me. She is not handsome, nor beautiful, still less does the word pretty fit her, as in one way and another it does most girls of her age. She is very young, loitering somewhere late in her seventeenth year. Her hair is of a dark-brownish tint, fine and luxuriant; and her eyes — large, clear, truthful eyes — match it; eyes that you can trust, and that will never betray you, either with smiling or weeping.

There is a fresh, dewy youth of girlhood about the face, and the red, fine, yet full curve of the lips, all suggest feeling and force; yet it seems to me this face of Jessamine Holland never belonged to anybody who had led a careless, happy childhood. There is a certain thoughtfulness pervading it, which hardly belongs to its years, and makes it sometimes look older than she is;



yet when the sadness slips off, as it does in bright and happy moods, the girl does not look her years, few as they are.

If the word were not so worn out with a certain kind of use, I should say this girl had an interesting face; it has a life, character, sweetness, of its own. There she stands, with her flushed face, and her wet eyes, and her lips apart, listening to the train as its rumble grows fainter and fainter among the hills.

The brother that swift train is carrying away is unlike her in looks as possible, and there is only a faint thread of family likeness in their characters. Ross Holland is now just twenty-one; he had the reputation of a bright boy at school; was big and awkward, though he has pretty much outgrown that, and has come up into a large, stalwart young manhood; nothing particularly elegant or graceful about him however.

As for his face, the features are large and of an agreeable homeliness, with eyes blue, wide, and clear as a lake, that waits in the deep heart of some forest for the summer dawn; and soft, bright yellowish hair, with that elusive golden tint which poets love.

The history of this brother and sister is common enough, but always a pitiful one. They come of a sort of broken-down race on both sides, though the old vitality of the stock seems to have quickened in them once more. The father, a dreamy, indolent, impractical man; a wood-chopper or a breaker of stones on the highway would have done more real service to the world, so he had been honest and diligent, than the father of Ross



and Jessamine Holland. The man somehow seemed sent into the world to be of no mortal use in it, — was a mere absorbent; yet he did not lack intelligence, and had the manner and conversational habits of a gentleman; had, too, his little stock of pet theories, which he was ready to air with a rather tiresome loquacity whenever he could get a listener, but set him to any work which required promptness and practicality, and he was doomed to inevitable failure.

There was some lack of stamina, some want of balance, in the mental or moral structure of the man, or both, which made his fate; how much was his fault, no mortal could know.

Such a man, of course, run through with his property, though he had inherited what, with ordinary care, would have made him a large fortune; but it slipped through his fingers like water through a sieve, while its owner mooned and dreamed among his books and pet theories.

Mrs. Holland was by no means the wife for this kind of man. She belonged to the delicate, nervous, clinging type, — one whom troubles and emergencies, requiring a prompt perception of the broad bearings of the case, and practical energy to meet them, would be likely to break down utterly. In those great test moments of life, which in one shape or another come to us all, Mrs. Holland was liable to go down into tears and hysteric spasms. Still, the burden was a heavy one, and the shoulders on which it fell were not fitted to carry it.

Long before their boy and girl were born, — for these were the last of a large household that dropped into



small graves, — the family fortunes had begun to decline.

Ross and Jessamine Holland had been born into that old, miserable struggle of pride with poverty. The husband and father wasted his days in dreams and theories that did nobody any good, and his wife grew worn every year with tears and anxieties and shifts of every sort. So the children were defrauded of half the life and brightness of their years in the dreary, depressing atmosphere betwixt the irritability of one parent and the wearing anxieties of the other.

Of course, every year made it worse ; the misery, being the consequence of defects and feebleness of character, had no remedy. The wolf drew closer to the door. One piece of land after another was sold to furnish bread and shelter for the household, while all sorts of sordid economies chilled the young lives coming up in the midst of them.

If there had not entered into the making of the boy and girl, some of the stamina transmitted from the long-dead generations, this cloud and darkness that hung so heavily on their blossoming years must have fatally dwarfed their natures ; but there was a force in both, though of a different sort, that repelled much which was unwholesome in the influence gathered around the dawning of their lives, — not that they escaped unharmed. The boy was naturally obstinate, and the rainy day atmosphere of his home often made him sullen. The girl was sensitive, and she became more or less moody and passionate ; but with all this, each nature would often assert



its birthright to happiness. And slipping off all their troubles, the two would flash up into hours of such high glee and wild sport, that the dark old home would shine out brightly from its prevailing hues of mist and vapor, settling back, of course, into its habitual tone after a while. For it was a dreadful struggle, — a sickening one, — with no steady hand at the helm, and that constant strain to make both ends meet and keep up some show of respectability on inadequate means. It came down at times to penury, actual suffering, hunger, and cold. And still Josiah Holland mooned about the house with his hands in his pocket and his face in a dream, with the poor worn wife, the hunted look in her eyes, and the pitiful faces of his children about him. Even their youth could not quite shake off the feeling of guilt and shame which clung to them.

Ross had just attained his fourteenth year when his father's life suddenly went out. The family was no worse for that; on the whole, a little bettered.

Some remote connection bestirred himself and found Ross a position as errand-boy in a lawyer's office. The salary was a mere pittance, paid to the boy's mother for his board, but trickled a steady rivulet into the small stream that nourished their lives.

So three or four more years went on. The father of Ross had been a scholar, and he had educated his son in a miscellaneous way, and the boy had plenty of opportunities to indulge his natural craving for study in his intervals of leisure at the lawyer's office.

At last, however, Mrs. Holland broke down with anx-



iety and overwork, and went out of life almost as suddenly as her husband.

By this time, the stream which, thus far, had kept soul and body of the Holland family together, was drained to its sources.

Ross taught district schools in the towns around for two or three winters that followed, and at last he found a place in the city as book-keeper, on a small salary. They gave up the old home which they had rented long before their father's death, and the sale of the faded furniture boarded Jessamine at the home of a servant who had lived with her mother in better days, and who had married a small farmer in the town, and had always retained a loyal attachment to the household.

This family history has occupied more space than I intended. The last words of Ross to his sister tell the rest. The young man had clearly discerned the situation, and what his prospects were in the over-crowded city. A long drudgery at the desk, and a slender salary for years, was not inviting to a soul tired of the grip of poverty.

An opportunity suddenly opened of a clerkship in a commercial house in the East Indies. The salary trebled his present one, and there was every prospect of advancement for talent and energy. You have seen what it cost Ross Holland to make up his mind to go, and how at the very last his will well-nigh failed him. The feeling betwixt Jessamine and himself was something very unusual even betwixt brother and sister. Probably the lonely, darkened childhood of both had knit them closer to each other.



Jessamine Holland had, as you must have discerned, no ordinary force of character when it was put to the test. She was resolved on some self-helpfulness, and through her brother's influence she succeeded in obtaining some copying at the two law-offices in the town. The remuneration was a mere pittance, and of an uncertain kind; but it gave Jessamine a blessed feeling of independence.

She was to live still with the family where she had found a home for the last two years. The household atmosphere was not refined, and there was much that was coarse and repugnant to a nature that had inherited fine tastes and feelings; but kindness of a certain sort, and a comfortable shelter, made up for much that was lacking. At any rate, this was Jessamine's only refuge, and here her brother left her.



## CHAPTER II.

“WELL, ma, you know Duke always was singular, and he would express his gratitude in a way peculiarly his own.”

“Certainly, my dear ; and one can’t say a word when we remember what an immense obligation the whole family rests under to the young man. It’s really embarrassing. It makes me shiver yet when I think of the peril from which Duke so narrowly escaped. What an awful thing it might have been ! I’m ready to do anything that is proper and generous to the preserver of my boy’s life, but I really wish it was an obligation that a handsome sum of money would discharge.”

“O mamma, it would never do to suggest that before Duke. You ought to have seen the way he flushed up when papa suggested it after they had gone over the whole thing together. ‘Sir,’ he said, — and you know how Duke can say a thing when his spirit is up, — ‘if I were such a caitiff as to offer money to that fellow for so nobly risking his life in my behalf, I hope he’d tell me that he was sorry he had not left my miserable carcass to rot under the waves. I should certainly deserve no better answer.’ ”



“And what did your father say?” asked the lady, with a little smile, evidently half enjoying the high spirit of the reply, — and only half.

“Oh, he hemmed and hawed, and said he was ready and glad to do whatever was proper, and that Duke must find out the best mode of proving our gratitude; but I thought papa wished, like you, that it was something which dollars and cents could pay for.”

In one corner of the handsome room the mother and daughter talked in a low undertone together; in the other was a group of girls at the piano, utterly absorbed in their chatter over some German opera music, — pretty, blooming girls, with a year or two dividing their ages, and a family likeness more or less decided running through the whole group.

Mrs. Mason Walbridge, sitting in the corner, with the bright crimson meshes of the shawl she was knitting flowing over her lap, for she had nice little theories of industry, looks just what she is, — the handsome mother of this blooming group of girls; a lady who, under all circumstances, and in any position which she may occupy, will be certain to reflect credit on herself, — a woman of respectabilities and fitnesses always. But if your line and plummet went deeper than this, — into heart, feeling, sympathy, — into the things that are vital and eternal, — this woman, with her fair outside and her scrupulous life, somehow failed you. The great trouble with her was an excessive worldliness. It interpenetrated her whole being, shaped all her life-purposes, colored her thoughts and feelings even, though Mrs. Walbridge was



quite unconscious of it, — people are apt to be of their besetting sins.

The world had always been kindly to this woman, her life flowing in broad, smooth currents; no dreadful ploughshares of grief and loss going down deep into her nature, and turning up the good or evil to the light; if there were in her, too, hot, sulphurous passions of selfishness, envies, malice, their fires had never flashed up to her consciousness; all seemed as smooth and polished as her life.

Mrs. Walbridge had married prosperously; indeed, you could hardly imagine her doing otherwise. Her husband was a rather dull, pompous man on the surface, with a good many obstinacies and angularities, but with plenty of business shrewdness and foresight, as a long and prosperous commercial career abundantly proved.

Mason Walbridge was fond and proud of his wife and family in his way. He indulged them, with a moderate allowance of grumbling, in all the elegance and luxury which his ample wealth afforded. He prided himself on what he regarded as the solid things of life, — money, respectability, social and business reputation. He even had some ambitions beyond that, — ambitions for civil and political distinction. He lived in one of the large inland cities of Massachusetts, and had been three times nominated for mayor, and once elected. “His Honor, Mason Walbridge,” as it always gratified the gentleman to have his letters superscribed, lived in one of the quiet, but most expensive localities of the city. The house would have struck you at once, with its solid, substantial look,



in the midst of pleasant grounds, an ample, rather pretentious stone house, with a couple of couchant lions on the steps, dark and grim, — a kind of stern warder of the respectabilities and virtues within. Then there were terraces, arbors, walks with facings of shrubberies, and on every hand rare flowers that rejoiced the eyes and inspired the air; and a fountain shooting up its waters from an urn between two reclining marble naiads, — everything very elegant and in good taste, you see; and everybody conceded that Mason Walbridge had the finest residence in town.

The eldest daughter of the house, Edith Walbridge, had slipped off her school-days, and was now in society. Her family was very proud of her, and in many ways she certainly justified the feeling; a handsome face, after the mother's type, fine bloom and delicate mould of feature, with a wonderful brilliancy and archness which made her very attractive in society. Her character, too, in its general structure, was like her mother's, with something more of force and individuality; a haughtier temper when it was roused, a stronger will when it was opposed; but these did not often indicate themselves, for Edith had the natural good nature of the family.

Mrs. Walbridge trained her children after what she believed to be the most exemplary pattern; indeed, she relished pet theories and maxims, and interfused them largely into all those admonitions on which the young lives about her were mostly reared. She desired her daughters to become, after her own ideal, perfect women,



wives, and mothers, and that ideal was one of exemplary respectability in all that the world values; an ideal, too, that the woman believed she herself realized, although a modesty quite in keeping with the rest of Mrs. Walbridge's character would have prevented her ever expressing any such conviction.

"There, girls, there; one really can't hear themselves think, you make such a chatter," was Mrs. Walbridge's mild admonition to the four girls about the piano, as the talk waxed louder and louder, after the manner of school-girls.

It was growing towards twilight; the golden lights haunting the shrubberies outside, until they burned up suddenly with the last unearthly glory and beauty of the day, almost, a poet might have thought reverently, as though God walked in the cool of the evening among them.

Mrs. Walbridge and her daughter, looking out, however, over the pleasant grounds, certainly thought nothing of this sort.

It was not an atmosphere through which flashed the sudden inspirations of poetic fancies, or across which loomed sometimes vast horizons of lofty visions, which, though they fade swiftly, leaving us only the flats of our every-day life, still haunt our memories like the mighty mountain landscapes where our feet have stood, or the vast solemn seas to whose shores we have gone down.

In the Walbridge atmosphere you always felt somehow that wealth was the greatest thing, and the most to



be desired in the world, — the one solid, substantial good, before which all other things dwindled in importance. What if it narrowed and crushed also all higher impulses, with all reachings of the soul after that life that is more than meat or drink?

“There comes Duke,” said Edith, suddenly, closing the book she had been indolently attempting to read for the last hour.

Mrs. Walbridge folded up the soft, glowing meshes of her knitting. “I’m glad to hear it,” she said. “It was very imprudent to go out so soon after that terrible exposure. I told him so; but Duke is like his sex and his age; he never will listen to reason.”

You would not have been half an hour in the Walbridge family without feeling that this Duke was some strong force in the household; not a pliant, nor perhaps altogether an approved one; nevertheless, a force.

The others were always quoting his sayings and doings, often with a little touch of ridicule or sarcasm, frequently with perplexity and more or less admiration.

There was a hurrying of feet along the passage, and he burst into the room,—a young man, looking his years, and they were twenty-two; nothing very remarkable in his appearance at first sight, as I know of, for Duke had managed to escape the general good looks of the family.

He was not particularly homely either; a rather slender, though broad-chested youth; a well-knit figure that gave a comfortable warrant of health and strength, but not a particle of Apollo grace in its movements; indeed, it had been one of the trials of Mrs. Walbridge’s life



that her only son should have barely escaped being actually awkward and clumsy during all his boyhood. He had outgrown that, — even the slouch in his shoulders and gait, though his mother in her secret soul hardly felt like insuring the latter now. A light complexion, a face that did not strike you as remarkable at first sight, but that somehow won you to turn and look at it over and over again, and each time you would like it better, — a strong, rather grave, manly face, with gray, clear, honest eyes; and, over all, a mass of loose beautiful hair, — a rich brown hue, gleaming here and there into auburn, — is the best portrait I can paint for you of Duke Walbridge.

That of course was not his real name, which was Philip, though his family had so far naturalized the other, that they would never get back to his legitimate title. Duke was the household name. It had become fastened on the boy when he was hardly out of small clothes, because of a certain dignity and independence with which he used to carry himself when he was opposed or angry, and which sat in a wonderfully amusing way on the small head and shoulders. From his babyhood there had always been some marked character and individuality about the boy, to which no other of the Walbridges, big or little, could lay claim.

So this “Duke” had clung to the solitary male representative of the family, and it was bound up with him now, for good or evil. Around it clustered so many old household associations, with their strong, homely fragrance, so much that was pleasant, and odd, and amusing, so much, too, of all that was tenderest and sweetest in the



young life of the household, that, though the statelier name might be aired on grand occasions and worn for strangers, the other had its roots far down in their thoughts and hearts, and would hold its claim, slipping over their lips and in their ears, — the dear old, threadbare household name.

There was a little stir at the piano and in the corner when he came. Duke always brought in one way and another a fresh breeze into the family circle.

“Well, Duke, you do get over your ducking the easiest of anybody I ever saw,” laughed Edith, who was always fond of rallying her brother.

“Hush, dear!” said her mother, gravely. “It was too serious a matter to speak of in that light way. I declare, Duke, I never can bear the thought of your going on the water again.”

“Well, then, you must make up your mind to my finding Death some time on the land then, mother. It strikes me one doesn’t make much by standing at guard with Fate all the time, as Angelos did with envy. Death is sure to have the victory in the end.”

“Why, Duke,” said Eva, the youngest of his sisters, — the pet, too, — coming over and hanging on him; “one would think, to hear you talk, you were as ready to die as John Knox, or one of the old martyrs.”

“No,” — speaking very seriously. “I didn’t feel that way at all when I found myself going down and the cold, salt brine gurgling and choking in my throat. Ugh! don’t talk about it.”

Eva drew nearer to her brother in a caressing way,



slipping one arm about his neck. There was a moment's lull at the piano. Duke's story had a dramatic interest for the girls, that superseded the German opera for a time. They were never tired of hearing him go over the details, and it was not often they could get him to talk about it.

Duke was dreadfully moody in this, as in most other things. He went on now in a moment, half talking to himself, "I tell you it brought up all my past life, in a single flash, as clear as broad noonday. I saw the whole of it, — little things I'd forgotten, that happened long ago, standing out sharp and vivid. I've heard of such things with drowning people, — I felt it then."

There was a little pause here. Everybody looked grave; everybody, too, looked at Duke with some new tenderness and interest for the awful peril out of which he had barely escaped. It gave him a new importance, a kind of hero aspect in all their eyes. Of this there was no need though. Duke's individuality always carried with it a certain power of self-assertion. He was not vain however; get to the bottom of him, underneath a certain morbid pride and sensitiveness lay a profound humility.

"How long were you in that dreadful water?" ventured Grace.

"Two minutes. You know I am a tolerable swimmer in smooth waters, but those great, roaring, hungry waves rushed over me and sucked me down. I tried to fight them, but it was little use. I was giving out and going under for good, when something grasped me, and a voice shouted, 'Hold on, and I'll save you.'"



He stopped here, his voice working and breaking up in his throat. There were tears in other eyes beside Duke's.

"You did not stay long in the water after that?" said Edith.

"Not very, though it seemed hours; moments do at such times. They stopped the steamer. I heard the shouts of the men over the roar of the winds and waves. They threw out ropes, and got a boat down and took us in, though we were both pretty well exhausted."

"It was a heroic deed, — saving my brother's life. It seems just like a romance!" rejoined Eva.

"Heroic! it was more than that, — it was sublime! risking his life to save mine in that way. The noble, generous fellow! It stirs every pulse in me to think of it."

Mrs. Walbridge was not consciously disposed to depreciate the character of the act, yet every word which enhanced it only added to her uncomfortable sense of obligation. "O Duke, how could you risk your life in that way!" she said, reproachfully.

"It was foolhardy, I suppose; but there was a terrible gale, which grew as the night came on, and you know what an intoxication a storm at sea has for me. I went on the upper deck, and stood there, drinking it all in with a strange, fierce joy, never dreaming of danger; indeed, there was none, if I'd had my wits about me. At last I fell to helping one of the sailors, who was removing a mass of stuff which had somehow got piled together on the upper deck —"

"What an idea, Duke, that *you* should turn deck-



hand!" put in here another of the sisters, with a little amused laugh, touched all through with contempt, not of the ill-natured sort though.

"I can't exactly account for it, but an instinct of helpfulness, of practical activity, seizes me sometimes in strange places and ways. I don't think I should have been sorry, if I'd gone under, to remember that my last act had been to relieve that poor fellow of part of his load."

Nobody made any reply here, and Duke kept on:—

"I had just reached the stairs when the boat gave a great lurch, and I staggered, tried to regain myself, and failed. The next thing I remember, I was going over the side into the sea. Ugh! the first cold plunge of the waves. But, girls, you have heard all this before,"—suddenly drawing back into his shell.

"Oh, dear, don't stop, Duke!" chimed up half a dozen young voices; "it would be new if you told it a hundred times."

"Of course they made an immense fuss over us when they got us back into the ship." It was Duke's habit to be light and satirical when he felt deeply, so they understood him now, and that the memory of the scene tugged at his heartstrings. "We were both pretty well used up, but the passengers and the crew gathered about us, the women talking and crying for joy. It was a great scene."

"I wish I'd been there!" chorused the young voices again.

Then one of them asked, "But what did you and the young man say to each other?"



“Nothing until the next morning. The doctors got us into warm sheets with cordials down our throats. And what could I say when we met afterwards, only grasp my preserver’s hand, and tell him what was the simple truth, — he had done for me the greatest deed one human being could for another, and placed me, too, under an obligation which I and all those to whom my life was dear must carry to their graves.”

“Well, now, that was just the right thing!” said Eva, admiringly. “I’m sure I shall remember the young man as long as I live, and that he saved our Duke’s life, — shan’t we, mamma?”

“Certainly, my dear,” answered her mother. It was the fit and proper thing, therefore she could not gainsay it.

“But what did the young man say?” asked another of the sisters.

“Flushed up to the very roots of his hair, as though instead of doing something to be proud of for all his life to come, he ought to be ashamed of himself. ‘Don’t put it in that light,’ he said. ‘I think you’d have done as much for me under the circumstances.’”

“Why, how manly and modest! He must be a real hero, like one of those grand old knights!” remarked Eva again, who had a girl’s romantic fancies of heroism and knight-errantry, and all that, though the household temperament was hardly one to develop anything of this sort.

“Daughter, don’t interrupt your brother quite so often with your impressions,” said the soft voice of the mother.



Mrs. Walbridge's reproofs were usually of the gentler sort; yet there was always a certain dignity and propriety in these, which gave them more weight and effect than any degree of vehemence on the part of some people.

"I told him in reply," continued Duke, "that I was not quite so sure of myself as he seemed to be. I very much doubted whether I should have had the generous courage to jump into that boiling sea, and risk my life for a man of whom I had never so much as heard.

" 'That is not exactly my case,' he said; 'I sat next you at supper, and we had some talk during the meal. I saw your face as the light flashed on it when you went over, and remembered it.'

"I recalled, then, some talk about the weather and the boat, which we had at supper. It had quite slipped out of my thought though; and, as I told my preserver, 'a man must be very magnanimous who felt so slight a circumstance gave another any claim on him, — to the hazarding of his life even.' "

"What did he say then?" asked Edith, who, like all the others, was absorbed in her brother's story.

"I don't remember precisely. It was easy to see that my thanks embarrassed the young fellow, and, in fact, any words I could say seemed so mean and small, so far below the vast debt which I owed the preserver of my life, that I, in turn, could find little to say. We took each other's names and addresses, and so parted."

"Now, if you had been two women," said Eva, who was a bright little girl, "you would have kissed each other."



Duke laughed, and drew the girl toward him with a little sudden demonstration of tenderness, quite unusual to himself; in fact any instance of affection on his part was always apt to leap out from a shy, reticent nature, which it suddenly overmastered. "We didn't do anything of that sort, Eva; but we wrung each other's hands, until both shoulders ached, I think. We men have to express our feelings in rougher fashions than you do."

"And you said the name was Ross Holland?" said Eva.

"It's quite a pretty one," said Edith.

"It will always sound more than pretty to me," answered her brother.

After a little pause, he continued: "I've been to see my friend this afternoon. He leaves day after to-morrow for the East Indies; is engaged in some commercial house there. I invited him up here to dinner to-morrow noon. I thought my family would wish to see, at least, the man who had saved my life."

"Certainly we do. I should have sent for the young man, Duke, if you had not first thought of it. I wish there was something we could do for him," said Mrs. Walbridge, who felt relieved to find the young man was going so soon to the antipodes.

"How does he look and appear?" asked one of the girls, naturally enough.

"He's rather a stout, well-knit fellow; a little broader and taller than I; a good face; not handsome, as you girls would put it; but a clear, open, manly face, — one of the sort that will make its way in the world."



“Does he seem like one who has had advantages of family or good-breeding, — a gentleman, in short?” asked Mrs. Walbridge, who somehow had doubts on this subject.

“I should think he must have been well brought up; but he isn’t one of your gloved and perfumed city fops, by any means,” answered Duke, who did not much relish the question. “He’s quiet and shy, I think; but self-possessed and straightforward. I haven’t asked him whether he was rich, or accustomed to the best society; but I should not be ashamed to introduce him to my sisters, even if he hadn’t just saved my life.”

If anybody in the world ever made Mrs. Walbridge internally wince a little, it was this queer son of hers. He had a habit of turning around on her some side of her question which she had never thought it possessed before, and which really seemed to carry a complexion of selfishness and pretension, which always made her a little uncomfortable; for the lady had that inward self-satisfaction and complacency to which she believed her virtues and dignity entitled her. The truth was, she was a little afraid of Duke, and could never exactly make up her mind just how much he meant by these speeches, or whether they were merely his habit of sarcasm. She was glad, however, that just then the sight of her husband’s cabriolet rolling up through the drive spared her the necessity of a reply, and Mrs. Walbridge usually condescended to explain herself, and make her position good after one of these speeches of Duke’s, — a kind of self-defence, however, to which she was seldom obliged to resort in her talk with others.



A moment after, Mason Walbridge entered the room. He was a rather portly gentleman, with a kind of solid, substantial air; just your idea of a prosperous business man settling down into a comfortable old age. Not that he had exactly attained this yet, though his hair was quite frosted and his face had gathered up thick wrinkles,—a man with whom you instinctively felt all mere theories, idealisms, enthusiasms, would find it hard to maintain themselves. There was a stubborn practicality, a solid materialism, suggested by the man's very presence; and this did not belie the character and temperament of Mason Walbridge.

“O pa, you ought to have been here,” said Eva, who you have already discovered was a talker, and petted more or less, as the youngest of the family flock has a prescriptive right to be. “Duke has been telling us over again all about his falling into the water; and he has invited that young man who saved him to come up to dinner to-morrow. I'm so glad. I want to see him so much.”

An invitation to dine at the Walbridges was regarded by them as conferring a certain honor. Their massive, carved front doors did not open indiscriminately to people. Their guests must have some warrant of social distinction, wealth, or business position, — some personal weight which passed muster with the world.

The gentleman looked at his wife. He was accustomed to refer all home matters to her opinion, having the highest regard for the lady's excellent judgment, and a pro-



found faith that she would always do the thing that was proper and best under the circumstances.

“That seems all right. What does your mother say of it?”

“I’ve already told Duke that I entirely approve of the invitation, my dear,” answered the lady; and that of course settled the matter.

Look abroad, my reader, over the world of your acquaintances, and see if you do not find more than one family with a general moral likeness to these Walbridges.



## CHAPTER III.

DUKE WALBRIDGE has told you already the story of his escape from drowning, and of his rescue by Ross Holland.

The latter had reached New York at the appointed time, but some unforeseen circumstances had delayed for three or four days the sailing of the vessel in which he was to take passage for the East Indies.

Meanwhile, the house with which he was connected having some business engagement to complete with a firm in an inland city in Massachusetts, it was suggested that Ross should relieve the partners of the journey. If the matter was satisfactorily accomplished, about which there was little doubt, he was to receive a hundred dollars and the payment of all expenses.

He thought of Jessamine. There was just time to return and give her a single day, which the poor child would hail with rapturous delight; but there would be the terrible parting afresh, and Ross shrank from the thought of laying bare that wound again.

If he accomplished his mission, Jessamine should have all that came of it. He would sacredly devote the whole proceeds to his sister, and there was no telling what a



hundred dollars would be to her, — smiling a little over that thought.

There was no doubt Ross would, in the end, be doing Jessamine the greater kindness by making this journey in her interests, instead of seeking her again.

So Ross Holland decided, and took the Sound steamer that very night. You know what happened then. Ross was a brave, impulsive fellow, and when he saw the face of Duke Walbridge, the lights flashing on it as it went over into the sea, all that was generous and heroic in the young soul thrilled into life.

He did think of Jessamine a moment, for, though he was a bold swimmer, that was a black sea, and it was at no slight risk that he entered it.

But again the light streamed full on the face, with the loud, hungry waves after it; the face he had sat next to a little while ago at supper, and been singularly struck with some power and expression in it.

“Perhaps he has a sister too,” was the thought that sent Ross Holland into that midnight sea, and God’s hand drew him out and set him on the steamer again, — him and Duke Walbridge.

Ross Holland went to the Walbridges that evening a little against his will. In the first place, nothing embarrassed him more painfully than any talk over what he had done that night. It made a glow of grateful pleasure about his heart to know how Duke felt over it; for, shy and reticent as Ross was by nature, something had drawn him toward the young man, just as he had never been drawn to any human being before.



In the second place, he had an instinct that he should not like his friend's family, or at least not be at ease among them.

Perhaps Ross did not consciously admit this to himself; nevertheless, there the feeling lurked. He had learned during his stay in the town that the Walbridges were wealthy, ambitious people, and this, with some other careless remarks, had given him a little insight into the family quality, and he shrank from it.

However, there was no way of declining the invitation except by hurting his friend. Ross was to return that night to New York, and he consoled himself, remembering that the dinner must be a short one.

Strange as it may seem, the Walbridges had their secret embarrassments too, — the elder members of the family at least, the younger ones being quite too eager with curiosity for anything of that sort.

Mr. and Mrs. Walbridge desired to do what was proper, and to be expected of them under the circumstances; but the trouble seemed to be to find out just what that was.

Here they were, under overwhelming obligations to the young man who had rescued their son from drowning, and there was no way of cancelling the tremendous debt. All their wealth could not do it. Nay, it would be an unpardonable insult to suggest money in connection with such a deed.

It was a most delicate and difficult matter to deal with; but there, like a great many other uncomfortable facts, it stood.



Great a sensation as Ross Holland certainly made, when he presented himself at the Walbridges, there was nothing very remarkable about him; a moderately good-looking, quiet youth, not lacking a certain self-possession, if he did color easily to the roots of his hair.

The girls watched with a great deal of eagerness the meeting between their brother and his preserver.

“I do believe,” said Eva, afterward, in talking it all over to her sisters, “that they would have hugged each other like girls, if we hadn’t been present.”

Mr. Walbridge, to whom his son presented Ross, made a speech on the occasion, expressing his deep sense of the obligations under which he lay to the preserver of his son’s life; but the man really would have felt much more comfortably when he got to the end of his remarks, if he could have taken a check in high figures from his pocket-book, placed it in Ross Holland’s hands, and said, “There! that makes all square between us!”

Then it came Mrs. Walbridge’s turn. That lady did her part in a manner becoming the occasion. When did she ever do otherwise? No doubt there was some real feeling underlying the finely rounded phrases, fitting into each other like a mosaic.

When she came to stand face to face with the youth, without whom the strength and pride of her household must have been lying stark and cold in his unfathomable ocean grave, and her own heart desolate with an unutterable anguish, no doubt the mother for a moment almost overmastered everything else in the feeling of the woman. Her voice swayed, the tears slipped into her eyes, she



grasped the hand of Ross Holland in both her own, and her pretty speech was not finished just as she had contemplated.

Afterward, the introductions to the sisters were easily gotten over. All the young ladies were disposed to be cordial to their brother's friend.

Still, Mr. and Mrs. Walbridge felt, I think, a little sense of relief when so much of the programme was gone through with. Perhaps it was not altogether unnatural. No matter how superficially one regards human nature, one cannot help perceiving that this gratitude is a difficult thing to deal with. Those who are largely entitled to it generally regard themselves as wronged and neglected. No doubt there is a great deal of truth in it; but there is something to be said on the other side. A burden of obligation is apt to press heavily on the recipient, and give him a certain sense of discomfort, unless there is a very fine sense of sympathy between him and his benefactor. This is, perhaps, not oftenest the case. The people who are the most generous in gifts have not always the finest instincts, the broadest natures. They may be ready to lavish gifts on you with one hand, and take a pleasure sometimes — so full of inconsistencies is human nature — in chafing you where you are weakest and most sensitive.

Now, no kindnesses can grant one indemnity for the other wrong. There will only be secret chafing and indignation, if not open revolt, all aggravated by the sense of obligations; for a blow falls doubly heavy from hands that have bestowed much on us. A man may give you



all his possessions, may risk his life to save yours, and yet in the closest sense you cannot call him friend.

I appeal to your own consciousness, my reader, whether this be not true, — whether the deepest love of your nature does not take its root in a soil that lies deeper than all gifts, — whether any claims of gratitude can ever compel your affection. But, for all that, a lofty and finely tempered heart forgets much in those who have served it — keeps faith with itself in grateful loyalty to its benefactor.

Ross Holland was the only stranger at the Walbridge dinner-table that day. The hostess had some internal misgivings about her guest's being equal to the mysteries of finger-glasses and nut-pickers; but she soon satisfied herself that Ross was at home here; and really, when you came to compare them, he had quite as much the look and bearing of a gentleman as her own son, neither being an Adonis in face or figure.

There was, however, a natural refinement in the Holland blood, which the last who bore the name had inherited, — some native instinct of the boy and girl always shrinking from coarseness and vulgarity as from something whose touch soiled and defiled.

Anything so ambitious as the Walbridges' style of living was, of course, quite new to Ross, and the ceremonial was a little embarrassing to one unaccustomed to it.

But Duke sat next to his friend, and there was a magnetism in the young man that, when he chose to exert it, would thaw almost any nature into life and ease. He and Ross were soon launched on a full tide of talk, the



others listening, complacent and curious, and interspersing their own remarks.

Through all this, Mrs. Walbridge, it must be confessed, felt a strong desire to know something of the character and position of the stranger at their board, who had established his right there so clearly, and whom no amount of courtesies and patronage could place in any relation but that of creditor. Mrs. Walbridge was, of course, quite too well bred to be inquisitive. Still, there were plenty of proper and natural questions to ask, which might serve as chinks through which she could get a glimpse into the antecedents of Ross Holland. When the fruits were brought on, she attempted one of these crannies.

“I think your family must be very reluctant to letting you go off on this long journey, Mr. Holland. I suppose, however, they regard it best to indulge a young man’s desire to see all sides of the world. The experience has its advantages too.”

The young men had been talking, sometimes soberly, sometimes merrily, with each other. Now the light in Ross Holland’s face went down suddenly.

“I have no family to regret my going, ma’am, except one sister, the last that is left of our kin.”

“Oh, dear! how can she let you go?” put in Eva, who sat on the other side of Ross. “If it was Duke, now, I couldn’t part with him, no matter if he could see, as mamma says, every side of the world.”

Now, if the truth must be told, Ross Holland was sore over his family history. It was not singular perhaps



That long struggle with poverty could not fail to leave its mark upon a sensitive nature.

Yet the morbidness was not of an ignoble sort. Ross Holland's face flushed, but a kind of brave scorn looked out of his eyes now. "I am not going to see the world," he said. "I would not leave my sister alone here for all it can hold. We are very poor, and I go to the East Indies solely with the hope of making a little money."

The words made a sensation at the table. People were not in the habit of talking in just that way at the Walbridge board. But, whatever Ross might say, they could not take exceptions, as they might in the case of ordinary guests. Their relations and his were anomalous, and placed him in a large sense above criticism.

A little silence followed, during which Mr. Walbridge said to himself, "Was that a hint now, for me to put my hand in my pocket and take out something substantial?" Then he met the eyes of his guest, and some heat that blazed in them satisfied the gentleman that no purpose of that sort had ever entered the soul of Ross Holland.

The truth was, that young man had an instinct of the estimation in which poverty was held by the people around him, and it was this that had forced out his acknowledgment of it. A brave soul, you see, whatever its faults were.

However it might have been in ordinary cases, the Walbridges treated Ross with more attention, if possible, after the avowal, on his part, of poverty. There was little time for further talk, as it was necessary Ross



should leave almost as soon as dinner was over, in order to reach the train, while Duke insisted on driving his friend over to the depot in his father's buggy.

Those blooming girls in their fine dresses had not affected Ross altogether pleasantly. It forced up a strong contrast between them and his little sister Jessamine. After all, she was prettier and just as ladylike, with her soft, quiet manners. He had never seen her in anything finer than a white dress, with a flower or a bit of bright-colored ribbon in her hair. "He should like to get some grand clothes on her,"—smothering down a sigh.

Then he remembered the hundred-dollar check that would be on its way to her before the next sun had set, snugly folded away in the letter he had been writing her all day in his thoughts. He saw the fair face breaking up into wonder and smiles and tears over it.

After all, the grand dinner had been a great bore, that good fellow, Duke, being the only really pleasant thing about it,—these thoughts drifting across his mind while he was going through his adieux with the Walbridges.

The elders were particularly cordial and lavish of good wishes for his future welfare,—"very fine speeches," Ross thought them afterward, for the youth had a slightly cynical way of putting things to himself, although underlying this little "tortuous rind" of bitterness was a sound mellow core of good nature,—and the young ladies beamed their brightest parting smiles upon him.

Mr. Walbridge took the address of the house with which Ross was to be connected in the East Indies, and informed the young man that any indirect influence



which he might possess with its heads should be exerted in his behalf, — one of those fine, vague promises which serve the moment, and so seldom amount to anything.

The pleasantest thing about the whole visit was, however, the last that happened. Just as Ross was leaving the room, Eva Walbridge hurried in from the conservatory with a couple of moss-roses in her hand, — all dewy bloom and fragrance. The child hurried eagerly up to Ross. “I’ve just cut them from my bush for you,” she said. “There were no more on it; but I wanted to give them to you for Duke’s sake; and — and — I thought you might like to keep them, and some time when you looked at them away off in that other part of the world, you’d know I hadn’t forgotten what you did for my brother.”

The eyes of Ross Holland warmed on the girl, as they had only warmed on her brother that day. “Thank you,” he said, taking the flowers. “I shall keep them carefully among my few treasures, and when they are faded and withered, they will be beautiful in my eyes, because, you know, they will be the flowers of home.”

Then he went away.

Mr. and Mrs. Walbridge felt relieved now it was over, and yet not just satisfied with themselves. It seemed as though they ought to have done something more or better if they had only known how.

“Really, my dear, that was very thoughtful and pretty, — giving the young man those flowers; altogether proper and graceful.”

“O mamma! I never thought of being proper or



graceful. I only wanted to give him something that I loved, because of what he had done for us all," answered the youngest of the Walbridges.

"What did you think of him, on the whole, Edith?" asked another of the sisters, the elder's gauge of people being regarded as final in the family.

"There's no fault to find with his appearance or manners, as I know of; yet I somehow had a feeling all the time, that he was not used to the best society."

"O Edith! how angry Duke would be to hear you criticise him in that way!" said Eva.

"His saving Duke's life is one thing, and his breeding is another. I can't see what possible connection there is between them," answered the young lady, with the air of one who perfectly understood what she was talking about.

"But," answered Eva, who manifested, at times, a little of Duke's uncomfortable tenacity of conviction, "it does not, after all, seem quite generous and noble to criticise the preserver of Duke's life, just as one would any stranger, — do you think so, mamma?"

Thus appealed to, Mrs. Walbridge hardly knew what to say, so she compromised the matter. "When you are a little older, my dear, you will see the matter as Edith does. She means perfectly right, and so do you."

Eva looked grave a moment, trying to discern the truth through the mist in which her mother's speech enveloped the matter. She did not succeed very well, and there was no help for it, but to fall back on the future years which were to make both sides seem right to her. Suddenly



the girl's face brightened: "I thought it was real noble in that young fellow to own right up, in that outspoken way, that he was poor, and going off to the ends of the world to make a fortune for himself and his sister. I know Duke liked it, too, by the way his eyes sparkled."

"Of course he did," answered another of the girls, with a little laugh. "Duke always likes outspoken independence of that kind."

"Well, who doesn't, with any sense?" asked Eva, in her blunt, girlish way.

Nobody answered; but the Walbridges were not quite certain whether they liked these qualities or not, and had a feeling, too, that it would not be to their credit to admit the doubt.

Meanwhile, the young men were on their way to the depot. Of a sudden Duke gathered up the reins in one hand and laid the other on his companion's shoulder. "My dear fellow, there is so much I want to say to you in these last moments, if I could only get at it."

"Plunge right in then. That's the way I do when I get stuck fast," answered Ross, the gayety of his air and manner covering some graver feeling beneath it.

"If I could only do something for you,—be of some service to you. Be generous now, Holland, and place yourself in my case. You've saved my life. That covers the whole ground of my debt,—the greatest one man can owe to another, and of course we're both above looking at it in that light. Still, it's a comfort to a fellow to do some favor to one who has received from



another what I have at your hands, and I think it isn't just generous to deny him that little crumb of pleasure."

"My dear fellow, I'd give you the whole loaf, if it lay in my power."

"It does, Holland. You can let me serve you somehow. You can find out some way. You know how eager I am to do this."

Ross looked up in the face of his companion, and caught the glow upon it, which lifted the face of Duke Walbridge into new life and beauty, as some sunsets do the clouds hanging dull and incoherent about a western sky, gathering them all up in one grand blaze of color.

Ross mused a moment. "There is one favor you can do for me, Walbridge."

"What is it?" asked Duke, with a kind of greediness, which at almost any other time would have made Ross smile.

"There's my sister, Jessamine, — it's been like tearing the very heart out of her to give me up to go on this long journey, with all its risks, you know. If we should never see each other again —" There he broke down a moment.

"Anything, — ask anything for her of the life you saved, Holland."

Ross gathered up his voice, forced it into a kind of husky steadiness again. "I should like you to be a sort of brother to her, — see that no harm comes to her. Poor thing! she's nobody in the world but me, — a shy, simple-hearted, loving child. It would break her heart if anything happened to me."



“Holland, answer me one question,” said Duke, with a kind of solemn authority in his tones; “didn’t you think of your sister before you went overboard that night for me?”

“Yes; I thought of her, — little Jessamine. And then I thought perhaps you, too, had a sister at home, and plunged in.”

For a minute Duke did not speak. Then he added solemnly, as one who takes an oath on his soul, to be held through all the after life, “If anything comes to you, Holland, I will take your place, as far as I can, to your sister.”

Ross smiled, — a smile Duke would never forget. “I shall go off with a lighter heart now,” he said.

“I shall take it on myself, too, to go up and see your ‘little Jessamine’ right off,” continued Duke, “and tell her all that has happened.”

Ross Holland’s first thought grasped eagerly at this offer; but the second one convinced him that it would not be well for Jessamine to learn at once of the peril into which he had plunged. It would only fill the child’s heart with fresh forebodings and terrors. The hundred dollars would seem like a sudden fortune rained down upon her, and that would be surprise and delight enough for the present. So he answered Duke Walbridge, “Just wait until I get safe and sound at the East Indies before you hunt her up, Walbridge. I’d rather she shouldn’t know just yet what we’ve gone through. You can do her more good, and me too, by waiting a few months before you go to see her. Meanwhile, I shall



feel as though I left my little Jessamine in your hands."

"Jessamine, Jessamine. That is an odd name, — a pretty one too," said Duke.

"It is more than that to me," answered her brother.

By this time they had reached the depot, and there were only a few moments to spare. They wrung each other's hands silently; they thought of the long years and the wide oceans that were to roll betwixt them before they should look upon each other's faces again. There were tears in the eyes of both.

The bell rang. Then these two — Duke Walbridge and Ross Holland — did what Eva had said they would do if they had been women, — kissed each other, and with never a word more, each turned his own way.

But Duke stood on the platform and watched the train which bore away the friend that he loved best on earth, — the friend who had risked his life to save his.

Then he entered his carriage; but, before he started for home, he wrote down in his note-book the name of Jessamine Holland, and of the old country town where she resided.

"Just as though I should forget it!" — smiling a little to himself as he slipped book and pencil back into his pocket. "Little Jessamine! I did not ask him; but she must be a child, — I fancy somewhere about Eva's age."



## CHAPTER IV.

THREE years and more had passed since Duke Walbridge and Ross Holland had parted at the depot. During almost this entire period the former had been abroad. His father had suddenly discovered symptoms of apoplexy, and the physicians had urged a sea-voyage for the gentleman.

So it was suddenly settled that Duke should accompany his father, and complete his studies in Germany, while Mrs. Walbridge and Edith should make the grand tour of Europe. Mr. Walbridge's health had improved, but his foreign business relations had detained him abroad longer than he anticipated.

Duke had, however, outstayed all the others by nearly two years. He was of just that age when foreign study and travel are apt to turn young heads a little; but his family affirmed that Duke had returned just as he went. They could not see that there was a particle of change in the fellow. He had grown a little taller and better looking, that was all.

But here the family judgment was superficial. Duke's growth was not on the surface; but during these years his whole character had widened; his thought, convic-



tions, modified and shaped themselves. Contact with the world, with people of varied civilizations and nationalities, had changed and broadened the young man; but the sound, warm, steadfast nature held its own quality still.

During this time he had kept up an intermittent correspondence with Ross Holland. The first year in the East Indies had not been very smooth ones to the young American. His health and habits did not readily adapt themselves to the foreign climate and modes of life. Still, Ross Holland's soul was a brave one. It fought the battle valiantly with homesickness and languor, through two or three slow attacks of fever, among strange faces and the fiery heat of the tropics.

Mismanagement, indolence, and extravagance had all borne their part in sapping the prosperity of the house with which he was engaged; still, it had the substantial foundations of an old name and reputation to uphold it, and Ross did his part faithfully, as he would do it anywhere.

But his expenses were heavy in a foreign country, and his salary allowed him little margin beyond them and an occasional remittance to Jessamine.

During these years the girl has been just where we left her, shut up in the homely old house whose rusty brown front faced the hills. What else could she do? Jessamine Holland had no fortune, and no influential friends. With the natural right of her youth the girl hungered, fairly sickened, sometimes, for a life less cramped and monotonous; for some color, excitement;



but it did not come, and so Jessamine settled herself to make the best of what she had, which is the truest philosophy for the wisest of us.

The copying, too, whose remuneration the girl fondly hoped would defray most of the expenses of her board, had largely disappointed her, affording her employment only at long intervals, so that she was obliged to fall back largely on the remittances of Ross, which it cost her high spirit a good many struggles to do.

But Jessamine told herself, with that innate vigor that some far dead ancestor had probably bequeathed her, that she was not going to rust out. It was lonely and desolate enough, — only her own soul and God knew that, — with her brother so far off, and she left stranded in the old town with nothing to do. There was a great world beyond, where she would like to take her part, — be of some service; but its walls were high, and she could not find a chink to creep through. Then, weary as she was of the old town, she loved it, for it was her birthplace; and though the people were of the narrow, conventional type, which one is too apt to find in remote country towns, with little elevating social stimulus, or breadth of thought or heart amongst them, still they were the faces and friends of the girl's childhood and youth, — all she ever had at least, for the Hollands had mostly dropped out of such society as the old town afforded. So the girl had buried herself in her studies. There was a moderately good library in the town, and from this, and from various other sources, she managed to obtain most of the books she needed.



It was no dilettante work with this girl either. She made a solemn purpose of it, and studied like any school-girl, setting herself no light tasks, and conscientiously fulfilling them, mastering Latin with the help of the clergyman, and plunging as deeply into natural sciences, metaphysics, and history as her opportunities afforded.

It was, perhaps, a little too much the life of a book-worm for a girl in the blossoming of her years; but then it was the salt which saved Jessamine Holland from the frivolity and gossip of the little town; and mind and heart ripened together, and in the furrows of those slow, silent days, she cast seed that brought forth their fair harvest in the womanhood to come.

Then Jessamine fed her young soul through all this time on the letters of Ross. These always turned the brightest side of his lot towards her, never abating heart or hope, and were vital with that brave courage which was the very marrow of his character.

So there came an afternoon when Jessamine Holland stood again on the veranda of the rusty brown cottage, as she had, almost four years ago, when she watched, white and breathless, for the train as it disappeared in the hollow. But it was not October now, and the year had no hint of chill or death in it. It was a June day, one of a cluster that had gone over the earth in golden pomp, dying in nights of starry splendor. But at this time the loneliness, the homesick ache seemed to have eaten deeper into Jessamine's soul than ever before. The singing of the birds, all the pomp and glory of the summer, failed to lift her out of the darkness into



their own mood of joy and strength. She had a kind of hunted feeling, like one who sees the walls close in on every side, and pants for fresher air and wider horizons. What was she in God's world, stranded there in that old house, with people whose kindly thought and care of her did not give them any wide sympathy into her moods and needs? It seemed to the girl sometimes that the chafing and the aching would drive her mad. Do not blame her. Think what her life was, and how long and bravely she had borne it.

She wore a white dress this afternoon, — remembering how fond Ross was of seeing her in that, — a bit of blue ribbon at her throat. When he was a boy he always admired that color too, and she had broken off two or three red roses from a bush on one side of the house, and twisted them in her hair, smiling a little to herself. As she surveyed the whole in the mirror, the smile, however, drowned itself suddenly in bitterness. “As though there was anybody in the world would care how you looked this day, Jessamine Holland! Ross would, but he can't see across all these leagues of land and ocean.”

Then she went out on the veranda, trying to find something in that June day, remembering that God had set it in the world as a sign and token of his love and bounty; but just then how far off he seemed! Yet she stood there in her sweet, delicate youth, looking the lady that she was by gift of that same God.

She heard the gate. She remembered afterward that she was too listless even to look out and see, through



the curtain of climbing vines, who was coming, taking it for granted it was some neighbor or child on an errand.

So she did not look up until the stranger stood on the steps. The girl gave a little start then, her cheeks flushed, and at the moment Jessamine Holland probably looked prettier than she ever had done in her life before.

A gentleman stood there, — she knew he was that with the first glance, — in a brown travelling suit, a good deal dusted. He lifted his hat. “Will you be kind enough,” said a voice, so clear and pleasant that one liked to hear it, “to tell me where Miss Jessamine Holland, the sister of Ross Holland, resides?”

Jessamine was shy; her temperament and life naturally made her so; but for all that she held possession of herself.

“I am Ross Holland’s sister,” she answered, her wide brown eyes on the stranger.

Great, in turn, was Duke Walbridge’s surprise. His family were at the Springs, some thirty miles off, and the young man had remembered his promise to Ross, and kept faith with it at last.

He had come up here to see the sister of his benefactor, with a general idea of a rosy, unformed country girl. He had debated in his own mind whether some toy would not be acceptable to “little Jessamine,” and had thought a pretty set of jewelry would probably dazzle the eyes of a school-girl.

But the Springs, though they had a reputation, were in an out-of-the-way place, where jewelry of any sort was quite unattainable.



"No matter. I can judge for myself, and get what is most appropriate afterward,"—settling the matter, and not quite certain but a wax doll would prove the right thing after all.

And this was "little Jessamine,"—this girl with the fair, delicate face, so unlike any he had ever seen before; not the beauty, certainly, that strikes men in a crowd, but that had a power and meaning of its own. There she stood, among the vines, in her simple white dress, with the bits of color at her throat,—something with whom it was quite impossible to associate anything coarse or hoydenish, and her birthdays had not quite clasped their twentieth.

The stranger smiled, and came closer now. "I am Duke Walbridge, Miss Holland. I hope I am welcome for your brother's sake."

The girl gave her hand at that word, but there was no gleam of recognition at the name. She had evidently never heard of it.

"Did he never tell you?" asked Duke, surprised enough in his turn.

She shook her head. "I never heard that name."

"It was like him never to speak of what he did, Miss Holland. I owe your brother more than I do any living man, for he once saved my life."

"You?—Ross did?"—the sweet face more amazed than ever.

"Yes, Miss Holland. The dear, generous, lion-hearted fellow jumped into the sea one night, and dragged me out of it at the peril of his own life; and I have come at last to tell you of it."



Her face all alive now — “How was it? When was it?” — hardly knowing what she was saying in her eagerness.

So Duke Walbridge began at the beginning, and told Jessamine the story as no other could have told it. He had a remarkable gift of expression, but if he had not owned this, the depth of his feeling must have given a wonderful power to his tale.

One saw it all, — the wild night, the awful sea, the life going down into the hungry waves, the shouts of the men, and then the brave rescue. Jessamine lived it all over in a shuddering horror. It was quite soon enough for the tender heart to hear the story, nearly four years after it all happened. Ross had judged wisely. Once she caught hold of Duke’s arm, not realizing what she was doing. “O Ross, my brother! my brother! if you had been drowned then!” — her face in a shower of tears. There were tears in Duke’s eyes.

“But he did not, you see, and here I am, with the life that he saved.”

“I am glad of that, — glad that he went to you, only you cannot know what he is to me, — all I have on earth, and what life would be to me if I lost him.”

There was a lounge at one end of the veranda. She went and sat down here a few moments, and Duke knew she was crying. He was almost sorry he had told her.

But she came back in a little while, and asked him to go on with the rest. “She’s got some of her brother’s pluck,” thought Duke Walbridge. But she swayed again when he came to tell her how Ross had said that he



drew back at that awful time thinking of "little Jessamine."

The rest of his story, however, was easy sailing. Duke told the girl about her brother's visit at their house, and their talk at parting, and the promise he had made, and why he had been so long in fulfilling it.

After this, all ice of formalities, such as requires, in ordinary cases, a good many interviews to melt, vanished betwixt these two.

Duke Walbridge had one of those natures that never forgets its gratitude. The memory of the vast debt he owed would alone have made the sister of Ross Holland, whatever might be her intrinsic character, an object of keen interest to Duke, — one whose welfare and happiness he would have been eager to promote at almost any cost to himself; but he had come utterly unprepared to find the girl what, the more he saw of her, she proved to be. The more he saw of her, too, the more she perplexed him, by the sweet, genuine frankness and grace of her speech and manner. "As much better than the showy, artificial girls he met in society," he said to himself, "as a wide, fresh morning beath shaken with dew, and full of fragrance and the gladness of sunshine, was better than all the perfume and glitter and display of some splended drawing-room."

She was like her brother, too, in a good many little subtle ways, difficult to analyze, and yet very readily felt.

How the girl could live there in that out-of-the-way place, shut up in a kindly but wholly uncultivated fam-



ily, and be the instinctive lady she was, puzzled Duke Walbridge more than anything had ever done in his life. The more he talked with her, the more she interested him; and, if the truth must be told, Jessamine Holland never had looked and appeared quite so well as she did this afternoon.

When she came to think it over after Duke had gone, the whole thing seemed like a dream. He called her "little Jessamine," and then apologized several times, corrected himself, and said, "Miss Holland." But the other name was sure to come first; and at last he said, with a laugh, "There is no use; I have thought of you so long as 'little Jessamine,' that no other name will come to me without an especial effort."

And Jessamine answered, and wondered and scolded at herself afterward for doing it, "Do not try to. It is the old name that I have not heard since he went away, and it sounds pleasanter than the first robin's song did when I heard it last May."

Their talk went a great many ways. Duke Walbridge had that reverence for womankind that I think is born in the soul of every true man; but, for all that, his ideas of young ladies had been shaped more or less by his sister's acquaintances, and he had a kind of feeling, which his fidelity to his ideal of womanhood had always prevented his expressing, that girls were, as a whole, superficial, gossipy, selfish. Anything really frank, loyal, genuine, it seemed to him he had yet to find among the young girls with whom he was thrown, with their foolish rivalries of dress and social distinction.



Even to these there was a better side; but Duke did not find it; partly, no doubt, because he did not try, being in a state of disgust with young ladyhood in general. Indeed, his strictures here were so wholesale and bitter, that his sisters did not hesitate to call him a bear, and to avow their belief that, "Duke was born to be an old bachelor."

But here was a young girl who had no airs, who evidently had not the faintest notion how to carry on a flirtation, with all the charm, brightness, spontaneity of earnest, intelligent young womanhood. How alert she was, too! how full of eager curiosity about the great world which he had seen! her questions slipping out in a soft, breathless, child-like way, that amused him. Once through, she stopped of a sudden, the bright color coming into her face as it had a habit of doing. "Do forgive me," she said; "but it seems as though I was talking with Ross."

"I want it to seem just so. You know what I promised him." And he went on, taking up the thread of his talk where he had left it, telling her all about his sail down the Rhine, through the golden girdle of just such a week of June days last year.

"I wonder how you manage to live here, 'little Jessamine'?" Duke really spoke to himself, and wished he could call the thought back the next moment.

A swift pain flashed into the girl's face. "It is very hard sometimes. It seems as though it must kill me; but I don't think God will let it come to that; and when the worst happens, I try to brave myself against the



thought of the time when Ross will come back, and we shall be together once more."

Just then they caught, faint and far off among the hills, the sound of the coming train. There was only time for Duke to reach the depot; and he had an engagement with his sisters that night.

"Next time — for I intend to come again — I shall stay longer, Miss Holland, and meanwhile, I shall take a brother's privilege, to write you."

And her answer was like herself: "When you come, you shall be welcome, — either yourself or your letter."

She walked down to the gate with him, and watched him as he went away; and long after he was out of sight she still stood there, rubbing her eyes, and wondering whether his coming and his going, and all the story of Duke Walbridge, had not been a dream.



## CHAPTER V.

DUKE WALBRIDGE had something on his mind. In fact, this had been the case with him for several days, ever since he had received a letter with a foreign post-mark on it, in reply to one which he had written to Ross Holland. Not that Duke regretted the letter which he had sent to his friend, but he had a purpose to carry out, and this involved a good many delicate relations and feelings on the part of others; and, although he was the prime mover in the matter, his own position must, in the very nature of the case, be a subordinate one.

The real truth was, Duke did not feel quite certain of the human nature with which he must accomplish his work. Most people have to take this into account in all their dealings with each other; and Duke, like the rest of us, had to make the best of his materials.

These last reflections passed through his mind, — he had a quaint, humorous habit of putting things to himself, like a good many thoughtful, reticent natures, — while there was just a hint of a smile upon his lips as he looked from one member of his family to the other. He did not know it, much less did they; but he was weighing each in the balance, and something seemed wanting.



This plan of his furnished a kind of touchstone, and before it the quality of parents and sisters seemed somehow to fail the son and brother.

Duke sat there, his book on his knee, a paper-cutter between the leaves, which he took up and played with every few minutes in an absent kind of way. Plainly, he was in no mood for reading; and Duke's silences and little eccentricities were an accepted fact in the family, to be made the subject of good-natured criticism and merry jest, oftenest to his face.

His sisters had been to a millinery opening that afternoon, and were eloquent over the new styles. One of the girls had been particularly fervid in her description to the less favored of her sisters of a hat which had particularly attracted her fancy. She concluded her account of the arrangement of flowers, plumes and ribbons, with, — "O girls, it was such a love of a bonnet!"

"Gertrude," said Duke, with a flash of emphatic disgust in his face and voice, "don't ever use that expression again. It is suited to the lips of only a silly, frivolous, affected woman. If I should once hear that remark, I should never want to turn and look at the woman who made it. I should know there must be something weak or wrong in her head or heart."

"Who ever thought you were listening, you old book-worm?" said Gertrude, more amused than provoked. "This is the first time you've spoken for half an hour, and now you're like a bear coming out of your den, and shaking yourself with a growl."

Gertrude was next to Edith. She had her full share



of the family good looks ; a graceful, stylish girl, with the bright bloom of her race.

The other girls laughed ; but Duke would never hear that speech again in his household. His own family paid a certain tacit deference to his notions, having an instinct that there was something right and sound at the bottom of them.

There was a lull in the buzz of voices. The millinery and its collateral subjects had been pretty thoroughly exhausted. Then Duke went over to his mother, and stretched his limbs on the lounge by her chair.

“Mother —” He stopped there ; he wished it was out and over, he could hardly tell why.

“Well, my son.”

Perhaps she spoke that name a little oftener, because, of all the world, she could only use it to this odd Duke, of whom she was very fond, and in many ways very proud, and in some a little afraid.

“I’ve heard you say, you and all the girls, that you would be glad enough to light upon some plan of proving that you remembered gratefully what Ross Holland did for me one night.”

“Yes, Duke. I never felt quite easy about the way we let that matter rest ; neither, I think, did your father ; but there seemed no help for it.”

“It strikes me that I have found a way in which you could properly and delicately express that you held in grateful remembrance that grand deed of his.”

“How is that, Duke ?” Mrs. Walbridge’s manner showed no lack of interest.



“You could invite his sister to pass the holidays, or the winter, with us. She is all alone, as I told you, shut up in that country-house, and I know it would do her good to see something of the world. I think you owe the girl so much attention as this ; and that anybody who knew the circumstances would wonder you had not thought of showing her some courtesy, — provided my life was of much value to you.”

This speech would have proven, to a shrewd observer, that Duke Walbridge was not deficient in diplomatic ability ; although, at present, he had no wider scope than his mother’s drawing-room. He certainly had set the whole matter before her in a light most likely to influence Mrs. Walbridge.

“I never thought of that before, Duke. I am not certain but this is a bright idea of yours. Still, I should like to turn the matter on all sides.”

“I can’t see that it has more than one ; but, I suppose, it is natural that, as my life was saved, I should take a stronger interest in the matter than any of the rest of you.”

Was that some of Duke’s “irony” ? Mrs. Walbridge was not quite certain. The whole subject was one about which she felt a little uncomfortable ; in short, not quite as secure of the ground which she occupied as she did of the most of her relations with all mankind.

“What are you and Duke talking about ? ” asked one of the girls, with a natural hankering for a secret.

“On a little private suggestion of your brother’s, — that is all. Go on with your nonsense, girls.”



Mrs. Walbridge's speech had just the effect of quieting the "nonsense" effectually. Girls in their teens have always a greediness for a mystery.

"O ma, do let us know now!" chimed several voices, while the group gathered about the lounge.

Duke felt a little anxiety to learn how his sisters would receive the proposition; for upon their secret complaisance with this plan must pivot Jessamine Holland's real pleasure in his household.

"Let the girls know it, mother. It concerns them as well as us."

Mrs. Walbridge was not unwilling to get the impressions of her daughters; for, to tell the truth, she was herself dubious about this plan of Duke's. She was hospitably enough inclined. But, after all, there might be some inconveniences in receiving this stranger, who came with such claims to make good her place in the family.

"Well, then, Duke has just been proposing to me that we invite Miss Holland here for the holidays. He thinks it the proper thing to be done; and you know we have all felt that we owed her brother some further expression of our gratitude. It strikes me that this attention to the young man's sister is the proper method of manifesting our feelings."

The girls looked at each other. It was a novel idea. They hardly knew, at first, how to entertain it.

"Of course she would have to go out with us, mamma?" asked one of the daughters.

"Of course; Miss Holland would be our guest, and we should treat her, under all circumstances, as such."



"I'd like to see her, any way," added one of the younger of the group. "I was so interested when Duke returned from that runaway call of his while we were at the Springs."

They had all been this, for that matter; making him go over and over with his description of Jessamine Holland's looks and manners, while the young man had sustained, with rather unusual amiability, a ceaseless round of questions. It was remarkable, the interest and curiosity which Jessamine Holland had created in the Walbridge family; and, somehow, Duke's replies to all their questioning rather stimulated than allayed the feeling. It was Edith's turn to speak now. Her opinion would weigh heavily in either scale.

"I'm not sure, mamma, but it is about the best thing we can do. So much depends, though —"

"Well, go on, my dear."

"We have so many engagements for the holidays, and, of course, Miss Holland would always accompany us. We should want somebody who was nice, and presentable, and all that, and sufficiently used to society to show no particular *gaucherie*."

"But Duke says she's a real lady."

"One of Nature's making," added another of the sisters.

The Walbridges, however, were not absolutely certain about the quality of that stamp. They had an idea that the best society was a necessity to the perfection of ladyhood.

"Duke is the one to know, as he has seen the young



lady ; and, even if she were not *au fait* in all social matters, she would soon learn whatever was necessary," graciously added the mother.

"I don't think you need have any trouble on that account," answered Duke, in his most frigid tones.

The subject, once started, did not die easily. It was discussed, on all its sides, by the feminine Walbridges ; and, on the whole, the more the invitation was agitated the more they inclined toward it.

Mrs. Walbridge did not *say*, but she reflected that if Miss Holland should prove herself an awkward, uncultivated girl, the gentility of the Walbridges would by no means be affected by her propinquity ; for it would be easy enough to have the matter thoroughly understood in their set, and the claims which Miss Holland had on their gratitude. This thought made her, secretly, more inclined to the invitation.

As for Duke, he listened, for the most part, silently. The current was setting in the way he had desired, and, in fact, foreseen ; but the whole tone of the conversation grated on him. It seemed to have a hard worldliness about it, that half irritated, half saddened him. Yet these women were dearer to him than any other in the world, — they were his mother and his sisters, — and he wished he had not been born with that faculty for diving down through the surface of things into purposes and motives.

"After all, were not all women like these ? If they were, he, Duke Walbridge, might as well make up his mind to remain a bachelor to the end of his days. There



it was, cynical and bitter again ; ” his thoughts hunting vaguely up and down, turning suddenly in sharp revenge on himself.

When the matter had been as good as decided that Mrs. Walbridge should write the letter of invitation, for the winter, to Miss Holland, in which every member of the family was to join, — for if the Walbridges concluded to do the thing at all, there was no-doubt they would do it handsomely, — somebody suggested that perhaps the young lady might hesitate to come before informing her brother, as the compliment was, after all, indirectly to himself, and no exchange of letters could take place between New York and the East Indies before the holidays, now at hand.

It was Duke’s time to speak now. “ I forestalled all that. Before I left the Springs I just wrote to young Holland, relating my visit to his sister, and entreating, as an especial favor to us all, that he would urge his sister to make this visit. You know he is not the sort of stuff that takes favors easily, and I had to feel my way cautiously. But I succeeded in getting the consent in his reply ; given, though, I see clearly, with some inward doubt or reluctance. I suppose that, however, will not crop out in his note to his sister, which he encloses with mine, and which is to satisfy her about the propriety of this visit. I shall enclose hers with the invitation.”

“ I cannot help thinking, Duke, that it would have been wiser to consult us before you had proceeded so far in this matter. Circumstances might have made



it inconvenient to receive your friend's sister at this time."

Mrs. Walbridge's tone showed that lady not very well pleased at this summary way of passing her over.

"I could hardly conceive of any circumstances strong enough to prevent a courtesy of this kind to one where I, at least, owe so much. In that case, however, I knew my friend, and could make it right with him; so I consulted nobody."

"It was just like one of Duke's odd ways of doing things, mamma," volunteered the youngest but one of the daughters; and Mrs. Walbridge was obliged to be content with this explanation.

After the matter had been settled, and Duke had gained his point, he went back to the table and his arm-chair; still, he did not feel satisfied, as a man naturally would who has carried a delicate bit of diplomacy to a successful issue. A good many of those miserable doubts, which come to chill us all, after we have achieved some purpose on which we have strenuously set our minds, came now to harass Duke Walbridge.

Would this visit of Jessamine Holland's be really pleasant to her, after all? Shy, sensitive, impressible, would she not feel the family atmosphere, and apprehend, if she did not comprehend, the observation and criticism of which she certainly would be the object? He had no fear on the score of attention and politeness; but there was something that went deeper than that: would there be any generous and hearty warmth in welcoming to their home the fair and bewildered young stranger, setting her



at her ease, in the midst of the luxury and splendor, and giving her a sense of dropping into some downy-lined nest of shelter and comfort? Thinking these thoughts, Duke Walbridge gave a sudden blow with his foot to a small ottoman at his feet, and turned it over, — an ebullition of the doubt and irritability that was in him.

Eva noticed the movement. “You pushed that over as though you were angry at somebody or something, Duke.”

“Perhaps I was at both a little,” — with that grim look on his face, which never came without something wrong lay beneath it.

“Is it because Miss Holland is really to come and see us?” asked Eva, trying a bit of joke.

She had no answer. Duke turned and looked at his sister a moment, with that look peculiar to him, and that always went deeper than one’s face. “Are you glad she is coming, Eva?” he asked, at last.

“Why, yes; I’m delighted, Duke. Aren’t you?”

“I’m not certain.”

“Why, I thought you’d quite set your heart on it, and was the prime mover in the whole affair.”

“That doesn’t prevent my being doubtful whether it is a wise experiment, — whether the sister of my friend will really enjoy herself among us.”

“Why, how can she help it?” asked Eva, as though the family hospitality was somehow attacked. “I’m sure we shall do all we can to make it pleasant for her.”

“Yes; but you know we are peculiar people, Eva.”

“Peculiar! How do you mean, Duke?”



“We’re very polite and genteel people; and no doubt we shall do all that is proper; but I think, too, we shall be a little patronizing, and that Miss Holland will feel it, and be chilled by it.”

“I think you are rather hard on your family, Duke,” said Eva; but she said it as one upon whose mind a new light is beginning to dawn.

“Well, doesn’t it strike you so, little sister?” — his look growing less grim. “Just think, now, for a moment, that you are in Miss Holland’s place, — a young girl, born and reared afar from cities, and shy as wood-birds and fawns and all those pretty, graceful creatures; but a lady, one of Nature’s making to the core. Now, just imagine yourself suddenly launched out upon a new life, — a timid, lonely girl, among people whom you had never seen before, — would the handsome house, would all the formal civilities, satisfy your heart? Wouldn’t that want something more to put warmth and ease into it?”

“Yes, it would, Duke.”

“And supposing you should feel all the time that the people among whom you had fallen were watchful, exacting, critical; that, when your back was turned, they discussed you with a well-bred pity and contempt for any little local breach of etiquette of which you might be guilty; though a lady, mind, I say, in all essentials, would you be really at ease and happy, — would you ever feel quite yourself, — wouldn’t there be a lurking loneliness and homesickness in the midst of all the splendor?”

Eva drew a long breath. “I think there would be,



Duke ; but then I never supposed we were people of that sort. Why, mamma would be quite shocked."

"Very likely ; but aren't the facts on my side ? Mamma's girls are so very genteel, that their hearts have taken an awful chill, as their toes do sometimes in their dainty slippers."

Eva laughed, as a girl would be likely to, over this conclusion, but she saw some precious marrow of truth hidden deep in the jest.

"Mine haven't, either toes or heart," thrusting out her foot, and displaying a handsome kid walking-boot. "I see what you mean, Duke ; and I shall do my part to make Miss Holland feel real happy and at home with us. I'll leave mamma and the girls to do the politeness ; but she shall feel my heart is in my welcome."

Duke smiled down on the girl now. "That is my brave little sister !" he said. "I like to hear you speak like that, Eva."

"And then, just think, Duke, what we owe Miss Holland through her brother. Where would you, where would we all, have been at this time, if his heart or courage had failed him *once* ?"

"There is not a day of my life, Eva, in which I do not say this to myself."

Eva drew closer to the young man, with a swift sort of caressing movement, as though the old terror of Duke's drowning moment came over her again. "Well, you are here, Duke ; and oh ! when Miss Holland comes won't I do everything to make her feel just as happy and easy as she would in her own home, and prove to her



what a heart of gratitude I have, because her brother saved mine ! ”

“ That’s my darling, noble little Eva ! ” And the glance of his gray, clear eyes, with the wonderful light which they held only at rare times, shone full upon the girl’s face ; and in his thought, Duke Walbridge from that time depended more for Jessamine Holland’s real happiness on his young sister, who was regarded a mere baby by the rest of the family, than he did on his lady mother, or her elegant eldest daughter.

The next day the letter of invitation was written, — a model of its kind, — and it was cordial enough to satisfy even Duke. Each of the daughters added her name to the mother’s, and Mrs. Walbridge begged that Miss Holland would do her friends the honor to come as early and remain as long as possible ; and out of her extreme graciousness, the lady even went so far as to add that, if Miss Holland had no travelling companion, she would herself provide a cavalier for the occasion.

“ That means you, Duke,” said one of the girls, with a laugh, when the letter was read in family conclave.

“ That was a happy thought, mother. I shall be ready on a moment’s warning.”

After this, Jessamine Holland was a frequent subject of conversation and curiosity at the Walbridges. The girl little suspected all this, in the lonely cottage off there among the hills, her youth beating impatient wings against the walls which imprisoned it in on every side. The more they thought of the young stranger who was coming to be their guest, under circumstances so pecu-



liar, the more kindly disposed the Walbridges, old and young, felt toward her.

Of course, in all this there was a patronizing element; but the Walbridges resolved that Miss Holland should be inducted into all that the city had to offer in social gayeties and unaccustomed splendor.

Her appearance and manners were matters, too, of much curiosity, Edith condescending to hope that Miss Holland was a presentable young person.

“But don’t you remember what Duke says about her?” asked one of the sisters. “I asked him if Miss Holland was stylish, and he said, ‘She’s something a great deal better than that; she’s a simple, ladylike girl. I only wish there were more just such in society.’”

“Oh, well,” replied Edith, “you can’t depend altogether on Duke’s statements in this matter. The girl would be likely to wear in his eyes some nimbus that ordinary mortals could not see, as she is the sister of Ross Holland.”

“Well, really, I don’t know as it is to be wondered at,” spoke up another voice from the blooming group.

And nobody answered.



## CHAPTER VI.

JESSAMINE HOLLAND stood by the kitchen window in the country house, and watched the first flakes of snow beating down through the sharp air. It was only a squall, she knew by the looks of the sky overhead, where little cold gulfs of blue were constantly revealing themselves betwixt the gray bulks of cloud; but she almost wished that a long winter snow would set in, — one of the kind which would block up the roads, and thus make the journey to-morrow impossible.

It was a large, homely room, that old kitchen; but the light had a pleasant, cheery way of looking in through the small, old-fashioned windows, and Jessamine Holland gazed around the room now with a certain feeling of tender regret, as the time drew near for her to leave it. That rusty-brown cottage was all the home which she had in the world, — the great world into which she was to be launched so soon; a vast, vague world on whose threshold she stood now, with a sudden thrill, half of dread, half of fear. She heard the children outside shouting in the snow, — two round, stubbed, freckled-faced boys, for whom Jessamine had a certain affection. There was a third in the cradle; a little bald-headed, fat, dimpled



bit of humanity. By the cradle, in a small rocking-chair, intent over a small, blue flannel coat which she was finishing for one of the little urchins outside, sat a woman with a faded, anxious face, — one of the kind which grows old early. You saw at the first glance that her life had lain in narrow, toilsome grooves, out of which it would probably never be lifted. When the smile came out on the worn face, it showed a warm, honest heart beneath it; and into its warmest corner, years ago, Ross and Jessamine Holland had found their way; and there were some strength and tenacity in the woman's temperament, — you felt this in the way in which her right foot jogged the cradle, in the very tone in which she hummed her lullaby over her sleeping baby, — whatever got into this woman's heart would be likely to stay there always.

At last the humming voice stopped; there was no sound in the wide kitchen save the faint drawing of the thread through the fabric. The woman glanced at the figure by the window, — a quiet girl's figure standing there, and yet it concentrated all the fine color and grace of the old kitchen in itself.

"Them flakes of snow won't come to anything, Miss Jessamine. Wind isn't the right way. You'll have a good day to-morrow."

The woman had a rapid, somewhat downright way of speaking, like one accustomed to dealing with the stubborn facts of life; her sentences short and to the point, clipping off the redundant conjunctions and prepositions. Her character had its angles as well as her talk. Jessamine had tact enough to keep clear of the former.



She turned now. "No, Hannah, I was not thinking of the storm, but of leaving you all here."

A softer look came into the worn face. It smoothed something there that was not just pleasant, — a little sharp, set line about the lips.

"You've been with us so long, child, that it's hard to let you go; only I know it's for the best."

Jessamine came around now, and took her seat on a low stool just in front of the woman, and looked at her with those broad, clear eyes of hers, their brownish tint, like her hair, vanishing often in black shadows. "Hannah," she said, "now the time has come to leave the old home here, I find I begin to dread this visit, and to shrink from the strange people I shall meet there. All my courage is oozed out of me. I'm just a baby instead of the woman I ought to be."

Hannah looked at the girl, — all the hard lines, all the little wintry sourness of her face disappearing in that look. "It's no wonder that you dread it, child, going out so in the world all alone, among those strange, grand people; but, for all that, the chance's a great thing. I've seen for a long time that this wasn't the place for you; that it was hard enough for you to be shut up here in the heyday of your youth with us plain, common people. You needed something finer and better, and it's been a long time coming to you."

Jessamine thought of the old, restless, chafing days. She did not want to draw back into their prison-houses again; and yet the world was such a vast, crowded, awful thing to her. She drew a long sigh, and then looked



up again, her face in a gravity which never comes to those who have not thought and sorrowed.

“One never can tell where impressions come from; but mine is strong enough to amount to a conviction, that these grand people, as you call the Walbridges, are cold and haughty. I’ve tried to get rid of the feeling, but it clings to me. It crops out, too, in Ross’s letter, — the darling fellow! I can see, through all his urgency that I should make this visit, a certain doubt or reluctance; a kind of desire to put me on my guard against something, without alarming me, and thus prevent my going. His instincts are keen, as you well know, and Ross would not have written as he did if he had felt I was going into a kindly home-atmosphere, where any deficiencies of mine would be excused and overlooked; he would not have said, ‘You will find the Walbridges very nice people, very elegant and refined, and all that; but I think none of them resemble Duke, unless it is that little sister of his who gave me the roses.’

“Now, Ross would never have written in that way, if he had not wanted, without seeming to do it, to prepare me, not only for an entirely new sort of life, but for people who would criticise closely the way in which I carried myself there.”

“Well, anyhow, you’re a lady!” said Hannah, looking at the girl affectionately. “You always was, from the minute you was born.”

A smile flashing through, and breaking up, for a moment, all the gravity in a face gifted with a rare elo-



quence of expression, — “Ah, Hannah, if everybody would only take that partial view of me !”

“Everybody will, who has eyes, child ; so don't you trouble yourself if these grand people take on airs. They'd better think what would have happened to them if it hadn't been for your brother.”

Of course, Jessamine never would have said this, — never have “put it” so, even in her thoughts ; but there was a kernel of truth deep in the coarse rind of the words, which nobody could gainsay.

“I am sure Ross's friend feels all he should on that matter, and his family must, or they would not have sent me this cordial invitation to visit them.”

“I don't see as they could do any less,” answered Hannah, in her sharp, decided way, which it was, oftentimes, not best to oppose.

She went on, in a softer voice, a few minutes later, laying down her work, and looking with a kind of tender seriousness into the face which sat opposite.

“I've had it on my mind, of late, Miss Jessamine, child, that something's going to happen to you. I don't know how, but I'm certain it's to come of this visit. Anyway, you'll never come back to the old house as you went from it. You'll have been into the great world, and looked with your own eyes on its pride and splendor ; and that harms some folks, and others it don't, and you'll be one of the last kind, 'cause it isn't your nature to spoil ; it never was, or you'd have turned sour long ago under some of the skies you and I remember.”



A quick look of intelligence, a swift shadow on the young face — those last words had touched the quick.

“ Yes, Hannah. You and I remember.”

Hannah had been with the Hollands through some of their seasons of deepest poverty and suffering.

“ But, child, I want you to remember that the old house waits for you with a warm welcome, and always will, until John and I have passed over its threshold for the last time. There’s a place always at the table, and a room always under the roof for you; and though both are plain and humble, maybe the thought will make your heart warm sometimes when the chill comes down on it.”

Hannah was little given to speeches of this sort, but her feeling now carried her quite out of herself into a kind of homely eloquence.

The great tears shook in Jessamine’s eyes. She laid her little, warm hands in the hard, brown ones of the faithful serving woman.

“ O Hannah! you are the best friend, the dearest, I have in all the world, except Ross.”

Hannah said nothing this time, only the head before her was suddenly blurred. She lifted one of her hands, and stroked the delicate face as she had done when it lay in her arms under its soft baby’s cap, and she herself was a blooming-cheeked girl, instead of the faded woman she was now.

And if she did not speak any words, Jessamine knew it was because she could not. The two understood each other. And through all this, the white-haired children



had tumbled and shouted together in the squall of snow outside. Afterward, there was other talk between the two in the kitchen; Jessamine had, in accepting the invitation of the Walbridge family, declined the cavalier which had been offered to her.

Hannah's husband had relatives living but a few miles from the city where the Walbridges resided, and as he had been talking for a year of making them a visit, and as this season was the one which afforded him the most leisure, it was decided that he should accompany Jessamine to the city.

A friend of the young girl's, who had fashionable relations in New York, and who passed part of every season among them, and whose taste amounted almost to genius, had been duly consulted regarding Jessamine's wardrobe.

The result had been a black silk for dinner-parties, and a white alpaca with blue trimmings for evening dress, — the finest garments which Jessamine Holland had ever worn in her life.

"Of course," she said, "the Walbridges will know at once, if they do not already, that I cannot afford to dress elegantly; and if they are ashamed to take me out with them, why, I can stay at home:" a speech which indicated a remarkable degree of good sense and moral courage on the part of a young girl about to make her first advent in fashionable life, on so slender a capital.

"A simple, genteel dress will carry one through a great deal; and yours is both," said her friend.

And so, with a new travelling suit, and fresh touches



to the rest of Jessamine's wardrobe, she was fain to be content.

Even the small outlay these involved cost the girl a pang. Ross had sent her a hundred dollars for this visit, and she feared the "dear fellow had pinched himself to the last dollar" to transmit such a sum to her.

If at any time the heart of Jessamine Holland half failed her, thinking of this visit, the thought of Duke Walbridge, her brother's friend, had come to steady it. She felt certain that he was at the bottom of this invitation, even though his influence might not be apparent there.

His visit, as you must know, had formed a grand epoch in the lonely life of the girl. That Duke Walbridge must feel an interest in the sister of the man who had plucked him, at the risk of his own life, from the very jaws of death, seemed so natural, so inevitable under the circumstances, that Jessamine would never for one moment draw any flattering unction to herself from any attention which he might offer her. Ross was the bond between them; no light one on either side.

Jessamine Holland was romantic; but she was not vain. There was a fresh simplicity about the girl which struck its roots into the very mould of her nature; it gave a certain earnestness to all she said and did; and, as it was a part of her life, this quality would lend a freshness and charm of youth to her old age.

You have seen such natures; they are sometimes abrupt; but Jessamine had delicate instincts, which would always be swift to spare the feelings of others. So much salt there was to savor the character of Jessamine Holland.



## CHAPTER VII.

It is an afternoon late in December. The sky is warped all over with dull, heavy clouds. The wind cries out fiercely sometimes, as the day settles itself sullenly into night. The air is stung through with a sharp chill, which smites into your marrow, and down into your heart, and mingles with any other chill, if so be it is there.

Just at this time a carriage drives into the Walbridge grounds and up to the door, and the lights from the windows gleam brightly upon the couchant lions on each side of the steps, until they seem to look larger and grimmer than ever.

Jessamine Holland alights from the carriage, and her first glance rests on the stern stone warders. Is it that sight, or the wind, or both, that makes her shiver as she walks up the broad front steps? The coachman rings the bell, and the door of the splendid home opens softly, and Jessamine goes in. She walks through the wide hall and up the handsome staircase to the sitting-room; where, as the door opens, she sees in the radiant light the Walbridge family assembled to receive her.

And now pause and think of her a moment, as she



stands in their midst, a lonely, shrinking girl, the only relative she has on earth such wide spaces of ocean away. There she stands, a quiet figure, in a gray travelling dress, something dainty and graceful about her, even in the midst of all those elegant people. There she stands, and heart and soul seem about to fail her; for it is an awful moment, — one she will never forget in all the time to come.

“Now, Jessamine Holland, steady yourself,” says the failing courage in the fluttering heart, girding itself up, and then Mrs. Walbridge steps forward to do, as becomes her, the honors of the house. She does them well.

“Miss Holland, I am most happy to welcome you to our home,” is said, in the lady’s softest, most gracious manner; but she is not thinking, “Poor, young, lonely, motherless thing! how trying all this must be for you!” She is quietly but keenly noticing Jessamine’s air and figure, and the fabric of her dress, and that warmer welcome of the heart it is not in the nature of Mrs. Walbridge to give.

Then Edith comes forward, with her fair, proud face, the rustle of her elegant dress following her path along the rich carpet, and her smile is bright; but Jessamine does not warm under it. And each of those fair, blooming girls has gone through her part, until it has come Eva’s turn.

She steps forward. She has been admiring the way in which “mamma and the girls” have gone through with their parts, and intends that hers shall not suffer a disparaging comparison with the others; but a



swift thought of a stormy night, and a voice shouting out through the darkness and the rush of the waves, "Hold on, and I'll save you!" sweeps upon Eva Walbridge. Her face trembles as it lifts itself to Jessamine. Instead of one hand, she puts out both, and grasps the stranger, — "O Miss Holland! I am glad to thank you, at last, for what your brother did for mine."

The words strike through the chill in Jessamine's heart. The tears slip, in spite of herself, into the eyes, that even Edith has decided are remarkably fine, and for the first time Mrs. Walbridge feels a little secret uneasiness.

Eva's welcome seemed to shed some new light upon hers, that made it, by contrast, appear lacking in cordiality. She had intended to say all that was required respecting their obligations to Miss Holland's brother when a fit season occurred, which surely would not be on the young lady's first arrival.

But Eva had anticipated her mother, and really Mrs. Walbridge could find nothing to censure, in speech or manner, of her youngest daughter. At that moment the maid appeared, to conduct the new guest to her chamber, and as she followed the young girl up the winding flight of stairs, Jessamine Holland thought of Eva's welcome, and it seemed the only really pleasant thing in the splendid home to which she had come.

As soon as she left the sitting-room, the inmates gathered into a corner, and a brisk conversation ensued. "Well, now, what do you think of her?" asked one girl,



as though it was absolutely necessary to decide Jessamine's status in the household without loss of time.

"She isn't exactly stylish, as we call it, mamma?" asked another, sufficiently doubtful to need the maternal confirmation of her criticism.

Mrs. Walbridge, not quite assured of the character of her welcome, desired to be generous in her criticisms on the young stranger: "Style, my dear, is not the only desirable attribute in a young lady. There is certainly nothing in her manner to find fault with."

"She was a little embarrassed during the introductions," commented Edith, who prided herself on her *sang froid*, under most circumstances.

"But, my dear," said again the mild voice of the mother, "you must remember how trying it was. I wonder she went through it so well."

"Her dress was simple enough; but then it was in good taste; nothing of the backwoods-air about it," added another of the sisters.

"Anyhow, I like her ever so much," broke in Eva, in her decided way; "and I'm sure she's handsome; nobody can deny that."

"Nobody wished to, I presume, if it be true, my dear," suggested the mother.

"But is it true? — that's the question," said another.

"Not exactly," replied Edith. "She has fine eyes and very good features, and, in full dress, I should think might look well. Her eyes are, really, something uncommon."

"It's a delicate face, — what I think people would call



interesting. I shouldn't wonder if she made quite a sensation in society ; for there's something a little unlike the ordinary type about her, I fancy," added Gertrude.

Into the midst of this feminine conclave Duke burst, panting. The criticisms would have to be a little more guarded now.

"Has Miss Holland arrived ? " he burst out.

"Yes, and has just gone upstairs," answered several voices.

"I'm glad to hear that ; I was just about starting for the cars, when an old chum of mine, from Germany, burst into the office. Of course I was glad to see him ; for we had footed and staged over half the continent together, and the sight of him started a flock of old memories, of climbing up the Alps, and moonlight boatings at Venice, and pretty peasant-girls at Italy.

"The time just spun off ; and when I looked at my watch, I saw I was too late ; the carriage must have gone without me. I rushed away from my friend, as quick as I could with any sort of decency, and hurried up here."

"I certainly expected and desired, my son, that you should meet Miss Holland at the depot ; but the coachman said he knew she was the right young lady as soon as he laid eyes on her ; so there was no difficulty," replied Mrs. Walbridge.

"Well, Pussy, what did you say to her ? " asked Duke, to Eva, who had come over to him, with plenty of talk in her face.

"Not much ; but I think she knew what I meant when I told her that I was glad to thank her for all her



brother had done for mine. I saw the tears come in her eyes then."

"You did?"

"Yes; and O Duke, I like her ever so much. I am sure we shall get on nicely together. They were all discussing her when you came in."

"Well, what did they say about her?"

"Pretty good things. They all thought she was lady-like and good-looking."

Duke said nothing, and, after a moment, Eva continued: —

"I haven't forgotten our talk, Duke. I intend to do all *I* can to make Miss Holland happy."

"I shall not forget it, Eva," — smiling on her now. "It will be a kind of test of the value you set on me."

Eva made some playful rejoinder, and, in the midst of the talk, her father entered, and she darted off to acquaint him with Miss Holland's arrival.

Just as the dinner-bell rang, the young lady entered the room, — a magnet, again, for all eyes.

Jessamine Holland was a young girl, and very human. She had made her toilet that evening with a good deal of trepidation, smiling a little to herself as she gazed around the handsome chamber, and thought of its immense contrast to the little room she had under the roof in Hannah Bray's cottage. The hair was brushed back from the low, wide forehead, in the only way she ever wore it; the dark, heavy folds giving their own effect to the delicate face. She wore her black silk, with the fresh lace at the throat. Poor Jessamine! she had not put it



on without a little pang at the extravagance of wearing it at a simple home-dinner, but she thought of the group of handsomely dressed girls downstairs, and she remembered the remark of the friend who had superintended her wardrobe, "That there is a great deal in first impressions."

Mr. Walbridge came forward, and received his guest with stately courtesy. Not so Duke. His greeting was so cordial, his welcome so full of frank eagerness, that Jessamine began to feel at her ease at once. His questions came so fast, that she could only find space to reply in monosyllables. Had her journey been pleasant? Was she tired? and then followed explanations and apologies for not meeting her at the depot.

There was the elegant Edith on one side; there were all those pretty, blooming girls about her; and yet, I half fancy, the eyes of a stranger entering the room, at this moment, would have returned oftenest to the quiet figure in the simple black dress, and the delicate face under the shading of the beautiful hair; though I suppose that would depend largely on the character and taste of the gazer.

Duke took Miss Holland out to dinner, but Eva claimed a seat by the side of her.

Of course Jessamine's manner at the table underwent something of the same covert inspection that her brother's had done before, without, however, affording any salient points for criticism.

The family was all gracious, although Duke and Eva seemed to feel that the new guest belonged, especially, to



themselves, and there was something in the young man's manner which could thaw any chill in the Walbridge atmosphere.

Jessamine Holland, too, had latent conversational gifts, which she never suspected, but which the world would be likely to develop; and eager, timid, expectant, she stood now, on the threshold of that same marvellous world of which she had so often dreamed, — a quiet, girlish figure, not without something pathetic in its silent background, in its youth, and its loneliness.



## CHAPTER VIII.

THE visit which launched Jessamine Holland into a new world placed the girl secretly on her mettle. Perhaps she was hardly conscious of it; but it was inevitable that a visit of this sort must prove a fine touchstone of whatever social powers were latent in her; a touchstone which would be likely, too, in subtle ways, to try something of one's real moral fibre, and to enable a keen and broad observer of human nature to discern pretty accurately what sort of qualities went to the making of the whole character. To any girl brought up as Jessamine had been, this visit must prove in many ways a severe ordeal.

A soft, absolvent nature, with natural refinement of taste and feeling, would have been permanently shaped and impressed by the influences which now surrounded Jessamine Holland; a stronger, coarser nature must have taken on a superficial varnish, while retaining beneath all its own strong individuality. The time had come now, as, sooner or later, I suppose it comes to all of us, to test what power was in this girl, — what sort of a woman had come at last out of the shadowed childhood, the lonely, defrauded youth; and when these tests came in forms



she looked not for, her own deeds are her witnesses for good or for evil.

At any rate, the Walbridges, who ought to be good judges in these matters, came to the conclusion that Jessamine would be worth patronizing; which a shy, commonplace girl would hardly have been. Not that they shut their intentions in a word, which has something offensive about it; they disguised all that under graceful terms of hospitality and courtesies. They had, however, an instinct that Miss Holland would be interesting, and might create a sensation which would redound more or less to their own glory.

So far and near circulated the story of Duke's rescue from drowning by Ross Holland, making of the latter quite a grand hero, and, of course, investing his sister with a certain atmosphere of romance and interest. People always like to hear new stories; and this one had a charm of peril and intrepidity which attracted every one. And so Jessamine Holland produced quite a sensation in the Walbridge circle. The family, too, were quite willing that everybody should discern their sense of obligation to the sister of Duke's preserver; for the feeling was one which everybody must approve.

So, within two or three days after Jessamine's arrival, everybody had heard the story of her acquaintance with the family; and, meanwhile, that young lady herself was making her first acquaintance with the city, having daily rides, and little shopping expeditions, and visits to the picture-galleries, and to whatever else was famous or interesting in the city.



She expressed her delight rather more energetically to Eva than to any of her sisters ; but the young girl's answer dashed cold water upon Jessamine's enthusiasm.

"Oh, we haven't anything in town worth showing at all ; but you should go to New York or Boston, Miss Jessamine. There you'll see something in pictures and statuary."

Jessamine wondered if she should ever have such good fortune as that ; and then she thought of the time when Ross was to return from the Indies with the fortune he had made, and they would not only go to all the great cities, but visit the Falls, and the Mountains, and the Mammoth Cave.

But that was a long time to look ahead, and, meanwhile, she must make the most of what she had now. A very few thousands, in Jessamine's eyes, were to make the grand fortune for Ross and herself ; most men and women would have smiled with a good-natured contempt over it ; but then Jessamine had been educated in a very stern school of economy, and she knew just how far a little money would go ; how much comfort, grace, luxury it would afford, which is a great thing for anybody to learn wisely.

In two or three days the girl made her entrance into society, at a grand party, — a sort of opening of the season. The whole thing was so entirely strange and novel to her, that Jessamine quite forgot herself in the bustle of preparation at the household.

She was bending, in breathless delight, over a basket



of flowers which had been ordered for the occasion, when Mrs. Walbridge, who was discussing with her daughters some of the details of the evening toilet, turned suddenly to Jessamine with, "My dear Miss Holland, perhaps you will like Jane to dress your hair for the evening? She has a wonderful art at doing those things well."

"Thank you, Mrs. Walbridge," answered the soft, steady voice, which they all had learned to recognize now. "I am in the habit of dressing my own hair, and I always wear it in one way; so I will not trouble Jane."

Of course this left nothing more to be said; but Jessamine was only well out of hearing when Gertrude spoke. "I wonder what she will wear this evening. In all our talk over our dresses, to-day, she has not said one word about her own. I wanted to ask her; but I was afraid it would seem a little like taking a liberty, though everybody talks freely over such things."

"She can't have much of a variety to choose from in that small trunk of hers," added Edith. "Why, I should no more think of going to New York to pass a week on a wardrobe that could be stowed in such small quarters, than I should of undertaking a journey to the moon."

"No, I should think not, Edith, from the amount of trunk-room you manage to occupy," added her mother, who considered Edith's views regarding dress rather extravagant, even for the daughter of so rich a man as Mason Walbridge.



“Well, I have a kind of feeling that, whatever Miss Holland puts on, she will look well in it,” added Gertrude. “Some people have a gift in that way.” And from this general remark the discussion of particulars was resumed again.

An hour later, Jessamine Holland came downstairs in her dress of white alpaca, terminating in a soft frill of lace about her throat, which dropped in a fine, gauzy scarf over her shoulder.

Not an ornament did she wear, except the little gold brooch at her throat, which had been her birthday gift from Ross. She had twined a few cape-jessamines in her hair that Eva had brought her fresh from the conservatory that morning, “for her namesake,” the child playfully said.

The white drooping clusters shone like stars through the dark hair, and there she stood among the richly dressed group, with their lustrous silks, their glitter of jewels, their glow of color; and I think the eye of any true artist would have rested longest, and with a certain fine relish, on the cool, quiet figure of the girl. Of course she underwent a minute inspection on all sides, and then Mr. Walbridge and Duke came downstairs to join the ladies; for the carriages were waiting.

“A party is Duke’s absolute abhorrence,” said Gertrude, confidentially, to Jessamine. “He’s been more amiable over the prospect of this one than I ever knew him. When he’s particularly cross we always know a party is impending.”

The young man’s eyes took in the group standing in



the front hall; a picture of youth, grace, bloom, such as one, it seemed, might never tire of beholding. He had a fine discernment of beauty wherever he found it, and his thoughts, stirred by the sight, went thus to his own soul: "A 'very dream of fair women.' How all that glow of color dazzles one, like the light in some of those still Eastern sunsets I used to love! How like a water-lily she looks among the others! — white, still, graceful, as though she had been gathered up suddenly from the broad, slow current where her life had ripened, silent and serene, into a great white purity and fragrance, and the dew is on her still, and the sunlight!"

If Duke could have looked at these thoughts of his, printed in a book, he would have been mortally ashamed of them; but, I suppose, Duke Walbridge was not alone in that matter.

People are apt to be in a good-humor going to parties. These flowed down the steps, full of merry excitement; so the carriages rolled over the drive, and, a little later, Jessamine Holland made her first entrance into fashionable life.

Late the next morning, the family met to discuss the party in what Edith, rather ambitiously, termed her "*boudoir*."

"I really think she made quite a sensation," said one of the girls. "There is something peculiar and attractive about her, and people like anything which is not the cut-and-dried pattern one always meets at parties."

"Duke spoke through you then," laughed Edith. "But I think the interest Miss Holland created is part-



ly owing to that matter of Duke's, which everybody has heard of by this time."

"Undoubtedly," said her mother. "I had to repeat the incident at least a dozen times, myself, during the evening. Still, I must admit that Miss Holland did herself remarkable credit for a young person who had seen so little of the world."

"She is a kind of a riddle anyhow," added Gertrude. "I watched her curiously last evening, for I knew she had never been at a grand party before in her life. Yet she carried herself through it without a solitary blunder of any kind; and really there were several gentlemen who were interested in her. She doesn't dance or play; but she does talk well, and she does look remarkably pretty when she is animated. Did you observe her while she was conversing with those people at the supper-table?"

"I did," replied Edith.

"Well, there was more than one gentleman who was struck with her. Really, mamma, now the best thing we could do for Miss Holland would be to get her a rich husband this winter. We should feel then that we had done something for her in our turn, and it would pay off part of the debt. I do hope somebody will fall in love with her."

"I should be exceedingly gratified, my dear, at anything which would advance Miss Holland's welfare; but, Gertrude, I do not like to hear you speak as though riches was the only desirable quality in a husband."

"I did not mean that, mamma; but you know how



important they are, especially for a young lady in Miss Holland's circumstances."

"I was telling over the story of Duke's drowning to some young girls last evening," said the younger but one of the group, "and they all insisted that it would be such a delightful romance in real life, for Duke to marry the sister of his preserver; in fact, that it was the proper thing for him to do."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Mrs. Walbridge. "Girls will say all manner of foolish things."

"I thought last night," said Gertrude, "that she made almost everybody else seem overdressed, she looked so pure, and white, and noiseless, like a kind of snow-drift; and yet it was nothing but a white alpaca, after all; but it seemed as though nothing else would suit Miss Holland."

"I suspect she has had little chance of trying variety. White alpacas are inexpensive, you know, and seem especially designed for people who can't afford to wear colors. It's my private opinion, that Miss Holland's party wardrobe is confined to that and her black silk dress," said Edith.

"Well, anyhow, she looks like a real lady in them; and you can't say that of everybody who wears velvet and diamonds," put in Eva.

"Nothing would afford me more pleasure than to make some additions to Miss Holland's wardrobe; but that is a delicate matter," said Mrs. Walbridge, who had already discerned that all patronage of Jessamine Holland must be skilfully managed.



“But, mamma, you know Christmas is close at hand, and each of us then can give Miss Holland something nice,” again suggested Eva, whose tongue always bore its share in the family conclave.

“That is a bright idea, my little daughter. We will have an especial reference to what will be of most service to Miss Holland in our selection of Christmas gifts.”

Meanwhile the subject of all this talk sat in her chamber, for Mrs. Walbridge had very considerably insisted that Miss Holland, after her late hours, should take her breakfast in her own room.

Jessamine Holland sat there, her head resting upon her hand, thinking over her last night. What a new world it was into which she had had a glimpse,—a world of gayety, splendor, luxury, that seemed like Prospero’s magic to her. She thought, too,—and the smile grew about her lips and a glow came into her cheeks,—of all the flattering attentions she had received. She was no angel, as I have told you before, moving amidst others with sweet unconsciousness, or lofty indifference to any admiration she might receive. On the contrary, Jessamine Holland had a large share of approbateness, and was keenly alive to the opinions of those around her. She had made her *entrée* at the grand party with a great many flutterings of heart; but before the evening was over she had found that she possessed some latent forces which she had never suspected in herself. She had felt their awakening as she stood in the midst of that group of men and women, conscious that they looked and listened with a pleased surprise of admiration. She



lived all that over now in a few moments, and the flash in her eyes was the flash of newly awakened vanity.

It was a dangerous time for Jessamine Holland. It always is for a woman when she first learns that she possesses some subtle power of attraction for men and women. The delicate head poised itself with a new pride; there was a new triumph in the smile that curved the red lips. The future was before her also. In its intoxicating atmosphere there was the homage of men, the envying admiration of women, the dazzling illusions of youth and vanity. The conquests which her charms should win, the triumphs which her arts should achieve, spread themselves before her. If there were pitfalls along that path, how could she know it with the flowers blooming gayly along their brink?

Yet suddenly, in the midst of all the flush and glow of the moment, the city clock struck, the loud chimes, one after another, rolling out their silvery waves into the silence.

It started the girl walking up and down the room in the charmed atmosphere of her fancies, and a new gravity came into her face.

It brought back to her the old, rust-tinted cottage, the wide, pleasant kitchen, where, at that very hour, she used to guide the slow passage of those two tow-headed boys down the alphabet. It was painful work at the best. She used to lose her patience sometimes, — though their mother or the boys themselves never suspected this, — remembering how nimbly Ross and she had sailed down the current of those letters.



Other thoughts slip in behind this last memory. She sees the old childish home, and the father dreams about the house, and the mother's pale face looks worried and scared. She remembers the nights when she and Ross cuddled over the bit of fire, and went supperless to bed and tried to think they were not hungry; and how she cried to herself one night, softly, her head hidden away in the pillow, because she had read that people sometimes lived a week without food, and that it would take such a long time for her and Ross to starve, and mamma had said they must all do that before they could beg.

The tears come into her eyes now, thinking of those dreadful times, and she glances, around the elegant chamber, at the silver and china breakfast-service on the table. If she could only have looked forward to all this, and seen herself here, how much it would have seemed like Cinderella's slipper, and all that came of it!

The pride has all gone, and a soft tremulousness has come around her lips instead.

She sits down now, and the "long, long thoughts" of her youth come again, not as before.

"Jessamine Holland, for shame!" they say to her. "Are these the things to delight your soul? Is this the womanly ideal you will go seeking after? Will you set no higher aim before you than the homage and flattery of men, the praise and envy of women?"

"Take all the comfort and pleasure that is the right of your youth in this new life that has come to you. But, beyond that, see that your soul possesses itself in courage and strength, in sweetness, and gentleness, and



truth. If you are happier, seek also, by so much, to be better.

“If you find that you have new powers to attract and influence others, remember always that God has left these in trust with you. You know you are vain, Jessamine Holland, and that admiration is very sweet to you. See to it, now, that it does not eat into your sincerity and simplicity. Try and not think too much of the impression you are making on others, and a little more of the good you may do to them, — of the happiness you may confer upon them.

“Many sharp sorrows have taught you their wisdom, and though you are in the midst of the days of your youth, you know these do not stand still, but slip and slip as the waves of the river do going to the sea.

“Keep faith with your youth, O Jessamine Holland ! ”

So her thoughts spoke to this girl, and her soul stood still and listened. Afterward, in the press and burden of life, other voices came and sang sweetly to her soul. Whether she listened and heeded again, I leave her own life to tell you.



## CHAPTER IX.

"THEY were all too old for a Christmas-tree now, with its wax tapers and sugar-flowers," Mrs. Walbridge averred, with half a sigh and half a smile, looking at her family of big girls and bigger boy. But after breakfast the household went, in high spirits, into the library, which had been for the last two or three days the scene of many private conferences, and the key of which Mrs. Walbridge had sedulously kept from all but privileged fingers. The whole programme was, of course, entirely new to Jessamine Holland, and she enjoyed it with the keen relish of novelty.

In one corner, on a table, was a huge pyramid of packages of all sizes, in white wrappings, with cards attached.

Duke took the post of honor on one side, and his mother the opposite one, while the latter read the names on the cards, and the former distributed the packages to their respective owners, amidst little shrieks of curiosity and delight.

The whole thing was altogether new to Jessamine Holland. She enjoyed the scene with a keener relish, though all its warmth and color lay against a background



of other Christmas mornings in the girl's memory ; some of them gloomy and sorrowful enough, but some of them bringing the marvellous wonder and delight of a china doll in a painted cradle, stuffed into the toe of her stocking, or a little box of small dishes with pewter spoons, and a row of wooden soldiers or a spinning-top for Ross. Her head is all astir and tremulous with those old, plaintive memories, and though she laughs with the others, she is not quite certain but that she wants to run away and cry.

She starts suddenly, for somebody calls her name, and the next moment something tumbles into her lap, — a large, soft, long package, which she sits a moment staring at helplessly, in a way which amuses everybody.

“Let me help you, Miss Holland,” says Eva, coming to the rescue ; for it is the fashion to speedily divest every gift of its wrappings, and expose it for general inspection and admiration.

Jessamine's fingers were dreadfully awkward that morning ; but Eva's snapped the cords gayly, and rustled away the papers, and lo ! a silk fabric of a soft, rich, lustrous brown, dark and quiet, and yet with a certain glow and warmth about it, as though it had just escaped a flood of sunlight. The texture was of the very richest and heaviest. Jessamine Holland could not imagine herself in anything of that sort ; yet one gifted with fine taste in such matters would have seen it was just suited to her face and figure.

“Why, is this really for me ?” half fancying there must be some mistake.



“Why, of course it is,” went Eva’s prompt, silvery little tongue. “Don’t you see, there’s papa’s name, too, on the card. That’s *his* Christmas gift. Isn’t it beautiful?” shaking up the rich folds in the light.

Before Jessamine could draw her breath freely again, another package tumbled into her lap; a small one this time, but you felt instinctively there was something very nice and dainty inside of it. Eva’s fingers were ready for service again, and a purple velvet case peeped out, and then, touching a spring, a lady’s watch and chate-laine, chaste and simple as possible, and as exquisite too, flashed up into the eyes of Jessamine Holland. She could not speak a word. Eva took up the card and read it: “Ross Holland, through his friend, Duke Walbridge.”

That was Duke’s way of making his Christmas gift; then such a gift, too, and such a way, giving the beautiful watch a double value!

Jessamine tried to speak; but if she had uttered a word, its path lay right through a sob, and in all the strong feeling of the moment she felt she must not lose herself before those people. But thick tears were in the eyes she flashed up to Duke Walbridge, and he took in all they said to him at that moment.

Afterward, there were other things fell into Jessamine’s lap: a brooch from Mrs. Walbridge, — a rare Florentine mosaic in a rich setting of gold, — and some costly laces from Edith, and pretty and tasteful things from the girls. Each one had remembered the sister of Ross Holland on this Christmas morning, and though



each gift had, no doubt, been selected with a certain reference to her wants, and would have an immediate serviceable value to her; still, the most delicate sensitiveness could not be pained at the character and time of the gift.

When it was all over, the girl tried to stammer out some thanks to the givers; but Duke interrupted her with some unusual feeling and earnestness in his voice. "Ah, Miss Jessamine, it is not for you to talk about paltry gifts; it is for us to remember that if it had not been for you and yours we should not to-day be the unbroken Christmas household we are!"

If there was any danger of the Walbridges forgetting, in the light of their favors, that they were the debtors, Duke took care to hold the fact before their eyes in the way most certain to keep their remembrance vivid, and to relieve Jessamine from any overwhelming sense of obligation, which was heavy enough at the lightest. She had her cry though, all alone to herself, upstairs that day, when she went to dress for the Christmas dinner. How good it was to be alone, after all!

There lay the beautiful things on the bed, worth more than all she possessed in the world. What would Ross say to see them? He would be thinking, now, of the old home Christmases, under that tropical sun, with the moist, heavy fragrance of Eastern groves all around him. As the slow winds slipped among the great plantain-leaves, as the sweet, mournful songs of the natives at their work rose, and quivered, and died in the sultry stillness, would he think longingly of the cold Christmas



mornings at home, — of the snows on the hills and the skatings on the river, and of the little sister who clung to him, half in terror, half in delight, in her brown cloak and bit of a pink hood, out there on the ice?

But she struggled out of all these memories into the present. There was so much to be thankful for this Christmas. She had never felt so tenderly toward the Walbridges collectively, as she did at that moment. Every day she said to herself, in a half-chiding fashion, “How kind, how good they all are!”

Yet, for all that, the heart of Jessamine Holland held itself back from these people who lavished their favors upon her. Motherless, lonely girl though she was, she could never have gone to Mrs. Walbridge with any vital joy or grief. The soft, measured tones, the very smile forbade that. A feeling that she must be always on her guard, that she was watched and scrutinized, clung uncomfortably to Jessamine, whenever she was in the presence of the lady and her daughters. It neutralized, to a large degree, Jessamine’s happiness in the elegant home. She was never just at her ease except when she was with Duke and Eva.

The child had taken an ardent liking to Jessamine. She was always certain to be at the girl’s side in the drawing-room, and in their walks and rides.

Jessamine, too, was singularly fond of the youngest of the household. With Duke and Eva she was thoroughly at home, and she found her highest enjoyment in those times when they three gathered themselves in a



corner, away from the others, and had their evenings together.

Then Jessamine Holland was mostly herself, — herself as not even Ross or Hannah Bray in the old home knew her. All her thoughts were alive and alert with Duke Walbridge, and yet she was less a talker than a listener.

All his travels and experiences opened to her the gates of a new world. She went everywhere with him in these talks. She stood in the awful silences of the desert, under the vast shadows of the pyramids ; she floated with him, in long, slumberous, sunny days, down the Nile ; she gazed, rapt and awe-struck, upon those vast Gothic cathedrals, whose awful mystery of power and genius were revealed only to the Middle Ages ; she hung upon pictures, whose trances of glory have enriched the nations, and she learned some of their grand meanings of form and color ; she toiled up wild, snow-bound fastnesses of the Alps ; she dropped down in the nest of green valleys hung among the mountains ; she gathered grapes, which poured themselves, in heaps of purple foam, along the hills ; she heard the songs of the Tuscan peasant-girls ring, in their silvery sweetness, through the golden sunset air ; she swung in Venetian gondolas over the black waters, and heard the slow dip of the boatman's oar break the delicious silence ; and she came back, at last, from all these scenes with her whole soul stirred into living power and beauty in her face, starting new depths in the brown, shining eyes, quivering about her lips in a new sweetness, whether of smiles or pathos, and



flushing her cheeks with a bloom like that of clouds before the sunrise.

But the talk slipped everywhere, like summer winds coming and going at their own sweet will. The sunny deeps of the girl's nature would flash out in mirth and playfulness, with a certain quaint originality through all; then a sudden gravity would steal into her face, and the shadows would fall into her talk, as they never do into those who have not thought and felt strongly, whether the souls be old or young.

It was strange, too, into what grave topics the talk had a tendency to stray sometimes. Neither Duke Walbridge nor Jessamine Holland had the sort of natures which is always content to dwell in the surfaces of things. All the wide circles of human thought and life had a keen interest for both the young souls, and Jessamine, in her lonely home among the hills, as well as Duke, in his wanderings over half a planet, had pondered deeply the profound mysteries which underlie all being here, — the silent past, from which we came; the solemn present, with which we deal; the awful future, to which we go.

And, in one way and another, these thoughts came out in the talk, sometimes on the man's side, sometimes on the woman's; but, in either case, they were sure to be met by sympathy of kindred thought and doubt. Each had battled with the same perplexity; each understood the feeling of the other. Fragments of this talk floated sometimes, through the hum, into another part of the room, and, after the manner of girls, his sisters rallied



Duke mercilessly on the matter, when Miss Holland was out of hearing.

“Duke has, at last, found a young woman after his heart,” said Gertrude, merrily. “I caught a few scraps of their talk last night; but, dear me! it was entirely too recondite for ordinary mortals’ ears. I heard something about the old Brahmin’s search after truth, and the Greek philosophers; about Ahrimanes, and Oromasdes, and retired in dismay. No doubt it was highly edifying and sublime for anybody who has a fancy to dwell on Mount Olympus, among the gods; but my ambition is humbler. What a dreadful blue-stocking Miss Holland must be to relish that kind of discourse!”

A laugh went around the circle; for Gertrude could say very bright things, and, when she was in a good humor, they never stung.

“Well,” answered Duke, whom none of his own household ever yet put down, “it is a comfort to find, at last, such a thing as a really sensible girl, — one who cares to talk about something but dress, flirtations, and fripperies of that sort.”

“Oh, well, Duke, youth must have its day,” answered Mrs. Walbridge. “Because you happened to enjoy an argument on the science of government before you were out of small clothes, it is by no means fair to expect that everybody else must.”

“I think you are putting my precocity rather strongly, mother,” answered the young man, who perfectly comprehended her secret pride in the matter. “Rattle-boxes and rocking-horses certainly divided my affections with



all profounder matters at the period of which you speak."

"As for Miss Holland's being a blue-stocking, it isn't one word of it true," subjoined Eva. "If you could only hear her when she's funny, you'd never say that of her again."

Eva's admiration of Miss Holland was an accepted fact in the family. Indeed, it was somehow tacitly understood that Miss Holland was, in some especial way, the property of Duke and his youngest sister.

It may seem singular that Mrs. Walbridge, with all her worldly wisdom, had no fears of the results to which such an intimacy might lead. In any other case she would have been watchful enough; but Jessamine was Ross Holland's sister, and in this light she fancied Duke regarded her. She was, in some sense, especially his guest. Whatever attentions he paid her, Mrs. Walbridge regarded them as offered for the brother's sake. Duke's very gratitude would cause him to invest the girl with graces of person and character, and perhaps the unacknowledged consciousness that something was wanting in her own feeling toward Jessamine Holland made Mrs. Walbridge peculiarly indulgent toward the intimacy of her son and her guest. She did not really admit it to herself; but she did not the less feel that her complacency here made ample atonement for whatever was lacking in herself.

Then, too, no ordinary conventional rules suited the present case. Duke's acquaintance with the Hollands had been made under peculiar circumstances, and must



always be of an exceptional character. The gratitude which he felt toward Ross was, no doubt, the secret of his liking for the sister, and it would not become the mother to prevent their being so constantly thrown together. Everybody in the house seemed to regard the matter from Mrs. Walbridge's point of view; so Duke, and Jessamine, and Eva went riding, sleighing, walking together. There was nothing worth seeing in the city to which the young man did not introduce their guest; and when they were not out themselves, or there was no company at home, the trio often had the evening almost entirely to themselves. Then Mrs. Walbridge's mind was unusually preoccupied at this time. Edith had several lovers to be regarded, and the mother began to suspect the choice to which her eldest daughter inclined.

It was evident, too, that Miss Holland had taken in society, and Mrs. Walbridge hoped, before the winter was over, that the young lady might make some eligible match, and intended to use all her influence for the furtherance of this scheme, the lady having no small tact in such matters. That would pay off, as well as one could, her son's debt, and with an elegant wedding under her roof to conclude the matter handsomely, and a rich trousseau, Mrs. Walbridge would feel that she had done all that could be demanded of her.

As for Duke, he had been just like nobody else from his birth. His mother did not think him particularly susceptible to youthful charms. Indeed, like the girls, she very much doubted whether he would not be an old



bachelor. So the mother reasoned; not unlike most mothers perhaps.

Jessamine Holland, upstairs, dressed herself, as I said, with some new warmth of feeling toward all the Walbridges that Christmas day. There lay the beautiful gifts on the bed, and every few moments she turned to look at them with smiles coming into her eyes, and tears, too, now and then. How much thought and kindness each gift proved, and how much delicate taste and tact each showed too! Everything was just what she wanted, and just what she could not buy. She was an ungrateful thing, to stand aloof as she did, in her heart of hearts, from those people. It was a foolish, miserable pride, not a high, generous spirit, which held her back from them all.

“And, Jessamine,” she said to herself, pausing a moment before she went downstairs, “you are not to think of yourself, you know, or of the impression you are making on others. That last will be very hard, because you are so fond of admiration; but while you are determined to have a good time yourself, you are to seek, also, to make one for others when you are among them.”

After dinner that evening, the family did not disintegrate into groups as early as usual. The day and its associations had some attractions which held them together.

The winds sprang up fiercely as the night shut down, and, if one listened, their cry outside was an awful thing to hear. One and another spoke of it with a little shiver



"How the wind does blow! Just hear that! It's like the bellowing of a gale at sea!" and comments of that sort.

Inside there was nothing but glow, and warmth, and luxurious ease. Jessamine wondered if there were any homeless creatures abroad in the storm, or any cowering in miserable homes, cold and hungry, on the Christmas night, to whose souls it had brought no "glad tidings."

"Did anybody there ever think of the poor, or know there were such in God's world?" Jessamine wondered. Mrs. Walbridge did, of course, because she was the president of a benevolent society.

What a good thing money was! What a difference it made in human lots! — looking on the scene before her, which was brought into stronger relief by the cold and darkness outside. They were all in their best humor to-night. Mr. Walbridge called for some music, which was rather unusual for him, and the girls played some of his favorite airs, and Duke went and sat down at his mother's feet, and laid his head in her lap, as he used to do when he was a little boy, as he on very rare occasions did now. The long, loose hair hung all about her lap. She took some of it up, and played with it, and stroked it fondly.

"O my big boy," she said, "I used to play with it just so years ago, when you were hardly higher than my knee. I wish you were just that little boy now."

"Why do you wish that, mother? Have I disappointed you so much, growing older?"

"Oh, no. Not that, Duke. Still, you seemed closer to me then. I could take you up in my lap and sing to



you, and be pretty certain you would not do anything I should disapprove, though you were a stubborn little rogue; you always liked to have your own way, Duke."

He lifted his brows archly; under them all the time the eyes had been smiling at the mother while she talked, with that rare tenderness in them which they only saw who knew Duke Walbridge intimately.

"Yes, I know,"—catching the look,—"you have not outgrown that liking still. It's an odd way, Duke, but it has never yet been a bad one."

"Thank you, mother dear, for so much grace. I mean it shall never be that last; that, at least, I shall always keep faith with myself."

"I have no doubt you will, my boy. I cannot imagine you ever doing anything which would make me blush because it was unworthy of you. And yet I can fancy your doing some things which might pain and distress me deeply."

"What are some of those things?"

"Do not ask me, Duke. I am sure I cannot tell what led me to speak of them to-night."

He looked grave a moment, pondering something in his thought, and his mother said:—

"You have the old wise look which I remember when you had only three or four Christmases on your head."

Mrs. Walbridge was in an unusually tender mood, and there were springs in the past that flooded her memory to-night.

"What a homely little cub I must have been among



all these handsome sisters of mine ! ” said Duke, in his bantering way, — “ A black sheep in the lot.”

It was true that Duke’s boyhood had no beauty to boast of. Even his partial mother must admit that. But she had always consoled herself with thinking that the boy made up, in other directions, for anything that was lacking in one.

Jessamine Holland, among the girls who were having a merry time on another side of the room, saw the tableau of the mother and son. The sight was almost more than she could bear. If Ross only had a mother that Christmas night into whose lap he could lay his head, and who would stroke his hair with her soft fingers ; if he was only where she could do it a little while, — her eyes clouding with tears. It seemed so very hard that they two, who so loved each other, must waste their youth apart.

Then she remembered the purposes she had formed upstairs, and, looking down, she caught the gleam of the watch she had fastened in her belt when she came down to dinner. That started a new train of thought. The clouds cleared in her eyes, and the smiles came about her lips, and after a while she joined in the general merriment, — light, breezy talk, none of it worth writing down ; and yet it sounded very pleasant with its swift gushes of laughter, and Duke and his mother, sitting apart, listened to the bright, young voices, and enjoyed them.

Jessamine bore her part in the general fun, and her playfulness seemed infectious, for even Edith, with some-



thing of the school-days she had left behind her, joined in the merriment.

Late in the evening, Duke came over to Jessamine's side. "I hope you've enjoyed all this nonsense as well as you seemed to," he said.

"Just as well. I entered into it from a by-path of very pleasant thoughts."

"I saw you smiling to yourself as you sat over there on the lounge, and I said to myself, 'Ah, Miss Jessamine, you are having some very happy thoughts just now. I wonder what they are?'"

"I will tell you, Mr. Walbridge. I was thinking of all I should have to write to Ross about my Christmas gifts, and what a nice, long letter my next one would be. I am frequently writing Ross letters in my thoughts, and I sometimes think they are a great deal better than those I send him."

"Dear fellow! I have been wishing, more than once, that he was here among us to-day," said Duke, earnestly.

She smiled up at him at that,—a sweet, grateful smile coming out all over her face.

"I have been wondering, all day, what he was doing, and certain that he would remember the old Christmases when he and I were boy and girl at home."

"I should like to hear something about those too," said Duke.

"There doesn't seem very much to tell. But what was wanting in the reality, Ross and I used to make up with imagining the time when we should be grown up,



and have plenty of money, and could make beautiful Christmas gifts to each other.

“I remember that Ross used to fancy me tricked out in gold and jewels, until I must have resembled nothing quite so closely as the wife of some chief of Otaheite, while my ambition was to bestow horses and hounds, and a little sail-boat on him,—the things in which I well knew his soul took chiefest delight.”

Duke listened, but hardly spoke. All this was opening a new world to him, and the vision of those two lonely children beguiling their Christmas hours with dreams like these moved him more than Jessamine would be apt to suspect.

But something in his look or manner drew out another of these memories, its shy face beaming down to Duke a moment from out of the mists of Jessamine Holland's childhood.

“There was nothing, though, on which Ross had quite so strongly set his heart as the gold watch which I was to have as soon as the fortune came in. There was an old one in the family, a kind of heirloom, which belonged to my great-grandfather, and Ross and I were allowed to hold it in our hands sometimes, as an especial grace, when we were just outside our babyhood. That old watch had a wonderful fascination for us both, with its low ticking, that went tireless all day like the katydids through the night, and its slow hands, which we had to hold our breaths and watch before we could be certain they were moving at all.

“The old heirloom went the way that all things of



that sort did in our family; but I think neither Ross nor I ever got over our childish associations, and 'Jessamine's watch' came to be the general sign for all the air-castles in the family, and we children were not the only ones who built them.

"Ross had his joke over the thing to the last, for I remember he said to me the day before we parted, 'Well, Jessamine, I shall have to go to the East Indies for your watch, after all; but, though the way is a long one, it's shorter, in the end, than it would be to wait for it in New York.'"

"And I know you said something in reply, Miss Jessamine. I think I see you doing it now."

The bright, cool eyes looked up at him in their pleased, surprised way. "*How* do you know I said anything then?" she asked, with just a touch of that pretty peremptoriness which was her habit at the time when Jessamine had been the youngest pet of the family.

"Because it is like you to do it. I can almost imagine the very words of your reply."

"What were they?"

"I think they must have been something after this sort: 'O Ross! I had rather have you here than all the watches in the world!'"

She looked at him with a wide amazement in her brown eyes. "Why, those were the very words I did say!"

He was a little surprised in his turn. "I did not expect that my bow would just hit the mark, — only come somewhere near it," he said.



“But it is very funny! I don’t understand it! I am half afraid of you!” speaking under her breath, and looking at him as though she almost fancied he must be some necromancer, against whose spells she must guard herself.

Her look amused him vastly. “Don’t fancy I am a professor of the black art, Miss Jessamine. I come by all my presciences by perfectly legitimate means. So it seems I have anticipated Ross in this matter of the watch. Do you think he will easily forgive me?”

“Oh, yes! I am sure he will.”

“I had a right to do that, also, because you know what I promised him about taking his place in our last meeting?”

“I am sure you have fulfilled your pledge. How good you have all been to me! I never felt this quite so much as I do to-night.”

Duke looked at the girl a moment, with something in his eyes which she did not understand. Then he spoke, in a grave, solemn tone, utterly in contrast with the one which he had used a moment before:—

“Whenever you say anything of that sort, I always seem to hear those words of Ross’ stealing across your speech: ‘Yes; I thought of her, little Jessamine, and then I thought perhaps you, too, had a sister at home, and plunged in.’”

She had no more to say after that, only he saw a look of pain come over her countenance, and her lip quiver a moment. Just then Eva bounded up.

“What in the world is the matter with you two?



You look as sober as though it was not Christmas night, and it wasn't everybody's duty to be happy ! ”

“ People may be happy and look sober sometimes. Only foolish little girls would fancy that one must be always on a high tide of joking and laughter to be comfortable.”

“ Oh, dear ! I suppose that ‘ foolish little girl ’ was intended to quite extinguish me, Duke Walbridge ; but I am not so easily put down as you may imagine.”

“ Experience has taught me that fact long ago, Eva,” answered the young man, with his longest face drawn on.

“ Now I shan't forgive you, Duke, until you tell me what you really were thinking of when I came up ; ” dropping herself down a moment on the arm of his chair. Duke smiled a moment, and glanced over to Jessamine. “ There, now, Miss Jessamine ! it was something about you, I am certain ! ”—following the look.

“ So it was,” answered her brother. “ I happened to be comparing the real Miss Jessamine with the one I had in my mind when I went up in the country last summer, to find her.”

“ Oh ! what was that last Miss Jessamine like ? I should like to know, and so would she, I am certain.”

“ Yes, I should,” replied Jessamine, curious and amused.

“ Well, then, she was a little girl, hardly so tall or slender as you, Eva, with the roundest cheeks, and a big pink rose in each of these ; and a mouth that was always



ready to laugh, and a dimple on one side; and bright blue eyes; and a little, decided-looking nose, with a plentiful sprinkling of freckles all over it; and a mass of bright, yellowish hair with a wave all through it, and a pleasant, open forehead beneath."

"Why, that is not one particle like our Miss Jessamine," said Eva. "You've just drawn a ruddy, rather nice-looking little school-girl."

"And that's precisely what I thought she was," added Duke, while Jessamine laughed in quiet enjoyment over this portrait of herself.

"But what did you think when you came to see the real Miss Jessamine?" asked Eva.

"No matter what I thought, only this much: 'Well, Duke Walbridge, you've been making a great fool of yourself all the way up here!'"

"Mother! girls! it's almost midnight," said Mr. Walbridge, rousing himself from his nap, and looking at his watch.

"What a strange Christmas it has been, and what a happy one!" said Jessamine Holland, a little later, in her chamber, going over the events of the day.



## CHAPTER X.

THE Young Men's Lyceum laid itself out for an unusually brilliant course of lectures that winter, "the highest genius and ability of the country," the advertisement declared, "triumphantly sustaining itself by a brilliant list of names." The Walbridges did not greatly affect lectures. That could hardly be expected of people who were familiar with whatever was choicest in New York and Boston literary and operatic entertainments, and were disposed to class any talent imported to their own town with all articles of American manufacture, "of an inferior quality."

Mason Walbridge, however, being a public man, felt it incumbent on his position to patronize all worthy institutions and organizations in the town, and he had been relied on from the beginning as one of the stanch supporters of the lyceum, which had now attained a vigorous life.

It seemed desirable that some of the family should manifest their interest in the lectures by an occasional attendance, although any suggestion of this kind was apt to be met by plenty of unanswerable excuses.

Jessamine, to whom a really brilliant lecture was



something entirely new, was as eager for one as for "a grand party." In Duke's opinion there was no comparison between the two, and Eva took a fancy to go with her brother and her friend. She liked the excitement, and to watch the crowd of gayly dressed people, just as she liked to go to church on Sundays, "no matter who preached." All that Jessamine enjoyed, too, with the keen relish of novelty, but she forgot everything else when the lecture commenced. The theme was, "The Flight of the Huguenots on the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes;" and the speaker brought to this subject all his profound historical research, the splendor of his genius, and the powerful magnetism of his sympathies.

The light, humming audience were fascinated by the power of the man's eloquence. The blackness of that night of persecution of men and women, and little children hunted to the death, driven to the galleys, worried and tortured for conscience' sake, swept its awful tragedy along the foreground for one moment, and all that is beautiful in faith, resignation, and self-sacrifice, under cruellest suffering, flashed out the next, — the pictures reminding one of John Knox's stories of Scottish Life in the sixteenth century, shining and quivering with laughter and with tears. It was a kind of eloquence to which Jessamine Holland had never before listened in her life, and it wrought like magic in the girl. At times the rapt audience would draw its breath, and cheer the speaker, and Jessamine, who had drawn off her gloves unconsciously while she listened, brought her soft, pink palms



together, and clapped as eagerly, if not as audibly, as any of the others. It was a pretty sight to see her, if anybody was taking notice at the time, — a kind of childlike grace and downrightness in the movement that was amusing enough.

“None of my sisters would do that,” thought Eva, “but I like to see Miss Holland, anyhow;” and then she looked at Duke, who was evidently enjoying their companion’s enthusiasm. .

Somebody else, too, was quietly observing the girl, — a gentleman who sat on the other side of the aisle. He was past middle life, with a grizzled beard and hair about a fine, thoughtful face; if its youth was gone, there was something left which atoned for the loss; the eyes, sharp and penetrating, under the bushy brows. They watched Jessamine keenly now, the owner thinking to himself, in a kind of loose, disjointed fashion: “Women are so polished and artificial nowadays, no getting to any sound core of what is in them. I like that girl over there; fresh, simple, natural as a brier-rose growing near a mountain stream. Quite a fanciful simile for an old man like you, John Wilbur; but the heart in you hasn’t grown cold yet, only steadier, steadier.”

Afterward, the gentleman turned many times to look at the face of Jessamine Holland that evening. Hers followed the speaker; all its power brought out that night the light in the clear, wide, brownish eyes, with deeps of blackness in them; the sensitive mouth, with the flush and the quiver all over it; a glow on the cheeks that was not exactly color, but something better than that, a sud-



den smile breaking and steadying itself on the unsteady lips, as sunlight on a heap of fiery peach-blossoms, over which the wind has gone a moment before; a smile, with the bright sweetness of a baby's; and then, the upturned face on the speaker's, the smile would be dashed out, a grieved tenderness would settle upon it, and you would need no looking to know that the eyes above them were thick with tears.

There are such faces as Jessamine Holland's in the world, but they are rare. Two such seem to shine before me while I write. I cannot think that the soul behind such a face could ever be anything but a fine, beautiful, womanly soul; not that only, a nature whose birthright of all gracious gifts had been widened and deepened by culture. Yes, I repeat it, there are such faces as this of Jessamine Holland's in the world, but they are rare.

After the lecture, this strange gentleman inquired of a lady of his party who that girl was with young Walbridge and his sister?

"A Miss Holland, who is stopping with them. It appears that her brother saved young Walbridge from drowning, at the risk of his own life. It was very heroic, and the Hollands have invited the young lady to pass the winter with them. Quite an interesting face, isn't it?"

"Quite." The gentleman was disposed to be monosyllabic on this occasion, but he remembered that he had an invitation on the following evening to a large party, where, no doubt, the Walbridges would be present.



The gentleman had resolved to decline the invitation, for, like most men of his age, he considered parties a bore ; but he now resolved to go. There would be a chance of his meeting this Miss Holland, and he wanted to know more of her.

The next evening Jessamine Holland was presented to Mr. John Wilbur. They got on wonderfully well from the start. Jessamine always liked sensible men, and here was one, certainly ; a man of good deal of culture too, and extensive travel, and who had something to say ; a polished gentleman, with a little touch of courtliness in his manners, which savored slightly of the old school, although Mr. Wilbur was not an old man yet, looking at the grizzly hair, and the fine, strong face under it.

“How much better he was,” Jessamine thought, “than those dainty, perfumed gentlemen who were full of their silly, vapid talk and unmeaning flatteries, which had a sickly odor to her taste, much like flowers that have stood too long in water. This sort of men seemed to have a notion that any sensible conversation was as foreign to a woman’s tastes as it would be to a parrot’s, and so they dealt in a stock of silly compliments, which were worn threadbare with long use.”

But the two got on wonderfully together, — Jessamine, bright, frank, earnest, as she always was when anybody gave her a chance.

The lecture of the evening before proved a stepping-stone to a great deal of interesting and instructive talk. Mr. Wilbur having recently visited France, and several



of the cities which had witnessed, at the close of the seventeenth century, some of the fiercest of the Huguenot persecutions, had a rare stock of information, which he had gathered there and in England regarding the fugitives; and he found it a strong pleasure to talk to this girl,\* who sat before him, with her wide eyes on his face, her breath going and coming, with her questions as swift and as curious as any child's.

Mr. Wilbur took Jessamine out to supper, and would have offered to escort her home had not Duke arrived at the last moment.

Mr. Wilbur's attentions had not escaped Mrs. Walbridge, but she kept her own counsel, only going over in her own mind all the points unquestionably in the gentleman's favor. They were not a few, — intelligence, family, wealth, position; everything, in short, except youth, which weighed very lightly in the scale against so many advantages.

Many a young girl of fortune and family has been taken to wife by an older and far less personally attractive man than John Wilbur. One, too, did not run those terrible risks which every mother must feel her daughter did in marrying a young man. In this case the character was shaped, the wealth and position defined, not spurs to be earned and won.

Then, rich husbands, in New England, were not as thick as bees in swarming-time. Any mother, who had daughters whose future settlement in life must be a source of more or less anxiety to her, must have considered all these things. A young lady in Miss Holland's position



would have a rare card fall to her share if she caught John Wilbur.

So the lady reasoned; meanwhile resolving to keep her eyes open, and visions of an elegant wedding, and Mason Walbridge giving away the bride in his usual stately fashion, floated before her as a most desirable finale to this embarrassing business of the Hollands.

After this, in one way and another, John Wilbur and Jessamine Holland were brought frequently together.

The Walbridges had a series of small dinner-parties, at which Mr. Wilbur was always a guest. The more Jessamine saw him the better she liked him. Their acquaintance grew rapidly into a certain kind of friendship. The approval of so intelligent and cultivated a man was really a great compliment to her, she told herself, with a little touch of vanity that was quite pardonable. But she had a relish for his talk. There was always something new and solid about it. He made her talk, too, grave and serious sometimes as a little nun, and then brought to the surface the latent sparkle and playfulness of her nature.

She talked with Duke about the man, praising him in that natural, frank way which would have been impossible "if she had had the slightest notion of his being a lover," Mrs. Walbridge thought, who overheard the conversation.

Duke assented warmly. "Wilbur was a fine, intelligent, noble-hearted fellow," he said. "He had known him from a boy as the gentleman, and his father had some business relations at one time which had brought the fam-



ilies on an intimate footing. He went abroad, and his wife died there, and he had only been at home at intervals since that time."

"Love makes people keen-sighted. If Duke had any interest in Miss Holland beyond the fact of her being his friend's sister, he would have observed Wilbur's attentions to the girl, though nobody else had. - She, too, has no fancy that his attraction is of a serious character, although I am well satisfied of that; but a great many matches are nipped in the bud by meddling. I will let things take their own course."

And Mrs. Walbridge fell to musing over Edith and her matters, in which just now the heart of the mother was more absorbed than in anything else. Duke was safe, she wanted to believe, and did.

Meanwhile things took their own course, — a very smooth one, — Mr. Wilbur and Jessamine getting on a more friendly footing all the time. She told him in one way and another many things about her past life, and talked over Ross with him to her heart's content. Mr. Wilbur had once passed a year in the East Indies, and here was another bond between the two. Jessamine was never tired of hearing about the strange, mysterious, wild, lavish life of the tropics. Its slow, hot winds, its fiery, throbbing life, its dazzling hues, seemed fairly to encircle her as she listened, her eyes darkening, her face uplifted. Mr. Wilbur saw it all, and had his own thoughts about it, which, being a reticent man, he kept to himself.

The circle in which the Walbridges moved was quite



as alive to gossip as any beneath them; but the intimacy betwixt Mr. Wilbur and Miss Holland was so far removed from anything like a flirtation, so straightforward and friendly, that nobody happened to dart on it. People who once heard fragments of their conversation fancied they liked to talk together; and it was not singular; Miss Holland had a wonderful gift at talking, and Mr. Wilbur was a man who liked sensible women.

One evening, at a little quiet supper-party at the Walbridges, the gentleman said to Jessamine, "I have had letters from Paris, which will take me there a month earlier than I expected. I regret it very much just at this time."

"Are you really going abroad? I am very sorry to hear that, Mr. Wilbur," — voice and face touched with a real regret.

The gentleman looked at her, with something in his eyes that brought a faint color into her cheeks. "I am glad to hear you say that, Miss Holland," he said, just as he had never spoken to her before.

In a moment, however, he went on to talk about the journey, and how he was going to take a trip into Wales that summer; and Jessamine listened as only those listen who have a real hunger for knowledge, growth, life; and at last, drawing a little sigh, she said, as a little child might say it, "I wish I could go too."

The gentleman smiled on her. You felt he had a pleasant smile under that grizzled beard of his. It entered the dark, penetrating eyes, and gave them a new softness.



"I wish you could go too, Miss Holland. What is there to prevent?"

"Oh, a great many things," answered Jessamine, thinking that, after all, the want of money was the chiefest obstacle in the way. "Perhaps some day my brother will come home and take me; though I never get so far as that, Mr. Wilbur. A little nest of a cottage, with Ross and me together, fills up all my world."

Jessamine thought that evening, more than once, how sorry she was Mr. Wilbur was going to leave so soon. How much she should miss him! It made her manner kinder to him than ever. Gentlemen in middle life, or a little past it, were so much more agreeable than young men, excepting Ross and Duke Walbridge; but neither of these were like other young men.

"Mamma," said Gertrude, next day, "I really believe Mr. Wilbur has taken a fancy to Miss Holland."

"What makes you think so, my daughter?"

"Oh, nonsense!" exclaimed Edith, who could not imagine that two people could fall in love with each other without a certain amount of flirting, and an atmosphere of airs and graces on the woman's side, at least. "Mr. Wilbur likes to talk with Miss Holland; but there's no more falling in love than there would be if she and papa were to have a chat together. Indeed, theirs is on precisely the same footing."

"But I hardly think it is," answered Gertrude, her opinion evidently a little shaken. "I watched them last night closely, and I thought Mr. Wilbur showed



a sort of interest in Miss Holland which papa would not."

"In love with Miss Holland!" ejaculated Eva.  
"Why, Mr. Wilbur's old enough to be her father."

"Many a man who is that, marries a young woman, and makes her a most excellent husband," added Mrs. Walbridge.

"In every respect but that of years it would be a great catch for Miss Holland," added the second daughter. "Mr. Wilbur is rich, influential, and all that."

Jessamine's entrance at the moment put an end to the discussion of Mr. Wilbur's qualifications for matrimony.

Two or three evenings later the individual in question called. It happened that most of the family were out, the gentlemen having gone to some corporation meeting, and the ladies to a concert.

It therefore fell to Jessamine's part to entertain her friend alone. Their talk went on smoothly as ever, and after a while touched again on the gentleman's impending journey.

"You said something last evening, Miss Holland, which I liked so much that I have repeated it to myself many times since."

"You have? I cannot imagine my saying anything worth all that consideration;" her little indrawn laugh along the words, which he had come now to know, and like too.

"It was that you wished you were going abroad also."



"Oh, I often wish *that*, Mr. Wilbur! There is such a world of novelty and splendor and beauty on the other side of the ocean; and yet it is quite absurd, my wishing to see it, when it is as practicable as entering in at the gates of the moon."

"Are you quite certain that you do not exaggerate the difficulties in your way, Miss Holland? I, too, wish that you were going abroad."

"Thank you, Mr. Wilbur. It is very pleasant to have friends who wish one good things. But I do not exaggerate the difficulties that stand in my way here. If I was rich, it would be quite another thing."

John Wilbur looked at the sweet face upturned to his. Its fine, delicate beauty had never struck him so forcibly before.

"Jessamine," he said, "I am a blunt man, and I cannot now go seeking for fine and dainty phrases into which to put my honest meaning. I wish you would let me take you with me when I go abroad—as my wife!"

She stared at the man, not comprehending what he said.

"I don't think I understood you, Mr. Wilbur," she said.

"I asked you if you would marry me."

A blankness, then a great heat all over her face. "Why, I never dreamed you thought of anything like this."

"I know you did not, my child. I was certain all the time you saw in me only a friend, who had something



to say that interested and amused you. You could not easily regard a man so old and grave in the light of a lover. But, Jessamine, my heart is not old, and if you will come and nestle in it you shall find warmth and comfort there."

The heat in her face still, the brown eyes clouded with confusion and perplexity. She put her hand over them, her mouth all a-tremble.

"I — it is all so strange and so sudden," she stammered.

"Perhaps I ought to have waited, and smoothed the way to a declaration of this sort," he said; "but I had rather you would take time to think. You are a sensible little girl, and I will trust your instincts to point you to the truth." And from that the man went on to speak for himself, of his boyhood and youth, of his early manhood, of the wife tenderly loved, whom he laid to sleep in a foreign land, and of the years that had followed, — lonely years, with all their worldly ease and prosperity.

From this he came to speak of their future together. It was no worn, old, withered heart that he offered her. If she trusted it, she would find it tender and thoughtful for her to the last. Then he dwelt on the new life it would be his delight to open to her, — a life of grace, ease, luxury, whose tale lingered in her ears like the music of fairy bells. She should have her day now. All that the fine, eager young soul panted for should be hers; the Old World, with its wonders of Nature and its mysteries of Art, its pictures, its sculpture, its palaces, and its temples, should open its doors to her. With her own eyes she



should see what she had been told, as in a vision, by others. They would drift from one city to another, stopping to take in slow draughts of what each had to offer. He was certain that her heart, like his, must be lonely for a friend such as he could be to her; she, with only that one brother, and the wide land and the wider sea betwixt them. Perhaps Ross could come to them, some time, and they could all dwell together and be happy.

She had taken her hands from her face now; the glistening eyes out of the paleness showed plainly enough how the words moved her. She was dazzled and confused; and through all she heard John Wilbur's voice, telling her what a tender, faithful friend he would be. Then a cloud of tears came into the soft brightness of her eyes; for, after all, this friend was what the lonely, tired little heart needed most of all.

"Will you come to me, Jessamine?" John Wilbur said, and rose up and put his hands out.

Her look went all over the man as he stood there, — over his large, shapely figure; over the fine, strong face; over the grizzled hair and beard. He offered her everything after which her youth had gone thirsting to cisterns that held no water. The future spread before her; the glittering slopes of the years, — the gold and the purple. Then the friend who stood there, generous, manly, noble, with his magician's wand. She did not mind if his years more than doubled her own. Was not this what she wanted, — a heart steadfast and strong against which hers could lean its youth and weakness? Had not God sent him?



Her breath came in quick, hot gasps; she half rose, her limbs trembled.

“Can you not trust me, my little friend? Can you not give your heart to me?”

Her heart; yes, he would want that. She had no right to take his without giving hers in turn. She drew a long breath. “I ought to love you a great deal, — better even than Ross, and — and —”

“I will not press you, child, for an answer. Let me come to-morrow or next day. I should want your heart, — I should not dare urge you to come to me without you could give me that; but young girls do not always understand. That might come in time, you know.”

“In time,— yes,” she said, doubtfully, as though it had not come yet, the face looking at him full of pain and perplexity. Then she caught eagerly at his promise to wait.

“It had come so suddenly,” she stammered again. “He must not be offended with her. As a friend, he was very dear to her; and for the rest, only give her time, and she would deal truly with him.”

“No airs nor vanities of any sort,” he noticed; but a trouble in her face that unbent it like a child’s. Yet it was her first offer, and, despite the difference of their years, one that she might be proud of.

She put up her hand now, in a tired, fluttering sort of way, to her forehead, the gesture showing, more than all which had gone before, how deeply she was moved.

Then she held out both hands toward him; her eyes were darkened with tears. “When a man offers a



woman all you have me to-night, it seems like an insult to thank him. Ah, my friend, you have made me feel humbler than I ever did in my life before."

"I had rather hear you say you felt proud and glad, my child," taking the hands, and hiding them away in his warm ones. "But it is an honest little heart. I can trust it. Whatever its answer is, it will be true to itself, — to me also." And he went away.

Jessamine was tired in every nerve of her body. She could not think now; and she went upstairs, only adding to the prayer which Ross and she used to make together at nightfall, and which she always said to herself in any time of joy, or trouble, or perplexity, because it seemed to bring the fresh child-heart into her again, — only adding to that a prayer that God would show her the way which was best and wisest for herself and for *him* also; and then she laid her head on her pillow, and fell into a sleep that was like the sound, sweet slumber of her childhood.

The next morning, Jessamine woke up with a vague feeling that a great crisis of her fate was at hand. In a few moments all that had passed the night before cleared itself to her memory.

"John Wilbur's wife!" She said the words over once or twice to herself before she rose, trying how they sounded, with a little smile and blush; but there was no thrill in her pulses, no transport at her heart.

She thought of all this man had offered her, — home, wealth, luxury, tenderness, — all that her youth had pined for. She felt unutterably grateful to him. How



beautiful that new life which he had promised looked to her, — like a fair country into which her soul could go and take possession, saying to itself, “No more loneliness and poverty, nor longing!”

“But did she love this man? That was the vital question,” — moving her limbs restlessly. He must have her heart, — his words coming back, — “he would not dare to urge her to come without that.” He ought to be first and dearest; and John Wilbur could never be that to her; he could never be what Ross was; and she had a vague prescience that her heart held some depth of tenderness and devotion which even Ross had never sounded.

Yet she liked Mr. Wilbur very, very much; liked to be near him, to hear him talk. It would be a very delightful thing to go all over the world with him, to see everything that was worth seeing, and, after all, would she ever find anybody else whom she could care for more of than she did for this man, who never bored her, whose presence was always agreeable to her?

Jessamine dressed herself that morning with a great doubt in her soul. Mrs. Walbridge watched the girl narrowly at breakfast. The lady was keen-scented in matters of this sort, and Eva had told her that Mr. Wilbur had been there the evening before, and there had been nobody but Miss Holland to entertain him, as the family were out, and Eva had been occupied with her lessons. Miss Holland had gone upstairs almost immediately after Mr. Wilbur left, saying she felt tired.

“How long did he stay, dear?” while the girls



were chattering like magpies over the concert, and paid no heed to what Eva was saying.

“ I don’t know precisely ; but it might have been a couple of hours ; at any rate, a good while.”

Mrs. Walbridge said no more ; but she put Eva’s tidings with some observations and suspicions of her own, and the joints fitted nicely. The lady’s keen scrutiny of Jessamine confirmed her impressions. The girl was restless and abstracted. Mrs. Walbridge felt that Jessamine’s youth and inexperience needed a friend now ; all young girls did at such junctures in their lives, and the lady had no doubt of being fully qualified to act the part of judicious confidant and adviser at this time. She had never felt quite so friendly toward Jessamine Holland as she did that morning. She recalled the fact that here was a young, motherless girl under her roof, who had now to decide the most important question of a woman’s life.

Of course Mrs. Walbridge could not offer her advice unsolicited, and Jessamine might shrink from a disclosure of her secret ; but the lady would bide her time, and make the way easy for the girl. There was a severe snow-fall that morning, which kept them all in-doors. It was a day for warm, cosey home-nestling in corners and groups, — one of those days which bring to the surface of household talk many a hidden sympathy, feeling, conviction, that has never seen the light before.

Everything aided Mrs. Walbridge’s purpose. The girls brought their books, drawings, and dainty attempts at sewing, into a corner. Some gossip about engagements



started the conversation, and Mrs. Walbridge availed herself of this to make some general statements about love as young girls fancy it, which sounded very sensibly, and might fit the case in point. She was not mistaken: Jessamine put down her sewing, and turned toward the lady with a half-suppressed eagerness in her face.

Edith, however, was not done with the gossip. She went on, heedless of her mother's remarks. "She has had so many offers, and, to my mind, she has taken up with the poorest of the lot."

The elegant Edith sometimes seasoned her remarks with a little coarseness, which surprised Jessamine.

The girl turned a shocked face on the speaker. "How very unpleasant it must be for the lady to feel the world knows all about the offers!"

Edith's light, sceptical laugh answered with her words, — "I don't think the lady would be at all distressed over that fact, as she has confided each offer to hosts of her friends."

Jessamine's face flushed indignantly. "I should think it most dishonorable to betray a man's confidence in that way."

"Those things, of course, are not to be made public," answered Mrs. Walbridge. "But all young ladies, at such times, need the counsel of some friend of wider knowledge and experience than themselves; and if they do not choose wisely, the whole thing is very likely to be made common gossip."

"But, mamma, I thought young ladies told their offers, and had a great deal of pride in it. I know some who



do, anyhow," — with a significant glance in the direction of her elder sisters.

"Daughter," said Mrs. Walbridge, with unusual severity, "it is better for little girls never to talk upon matters about which they know nothing."

Jessamine's look had turned on the lady a moment, and rested there. The lonely, perplexed heart within her needed some friend stronger and wiser than itself to trust in this great strait. She thought of Hannah Bray, with her strong native sense and warm, motherly heart, and wished she could go and lay down her head on the coarse gingham apron, and tell her story, sure of getting up steadier and clearer at the end. There was a motherless pain in the girl's heart at that moment.

There sat the lady with her mild, pleasant face, and her modulated tones. She was certain that Mrs. Walbridge would listen kindly and interested to all Jessamine might say.

But a little shiver came over the girl as she looked. There was something which she wanted that was not in this woman to give. She could hardly define what, but she felt it; something homely, real, tender. Jessamine drew a long breath. Wherever the truth lay, she must seek it for herself, alone.

Mrs. Walbridge had seen the look, and fancied she divined its meaning. In a few moments she rose and went into the conservatory, and her voice presently came back. "Won't you do me the favor to walk in here, Miss Jessamine? I want to show you how the orange-trees have blossomed within a few days."



Of course, Jessamine went.

There was something a little unusual in the bland kindness of Mrs. Walbridge's manner, while the two were in the conservatory together that morning.

As the girl stood there, in the midst of all the color and fragrance that made a bit of hot midsummer in the heart of the stormy winter day, the lady said, with her pleasantest smile, pointing to the clusters of snowy blossoms among the dark burnished green of the leaves : —

“ You know the tradition of orange-flowers, my dear. For myself, I must own I have an affection for them on that account, and I never see a heap of these in full bloom, without feeling an impulse at my fingers' ends to twine them into a bridal wreath, fancying, too, some fair, young face all smiles and blushes beneath them. Some day, my dear Miss Jessamine, I hope I shall have the pleasure of twining my blossoms here ; ” and she actually touched the soft hair with her fingers.

Certainly this was “ opening the door ” with a tact worthy of Mrs. Walbridge. Jessamine glanced up at the lady again, some feeling flushing and stirring her face.

She was on the very point of speaking ; but something held the words back, for which Mrs. Walbridge, seeing the movement, stood confidently waiting.

Jessamine half drew and smothered a sigh. It seemed as though her words were stubborn, and would not come though she wanted them. They would have come quick enough to Hannah Bray though.

Mrs. Walbridge was a good deal chagrined, when, after



a little further talk over the flowers, Miss Holland went up to her room.

“ I thought she certainly would speak then,” said the lady to herself. “ She seemed on the very point of it too. What could have held her back ? If, after all, she should let John Wilbur slip, what a golden chance she would lose ! I wanted to tell her this ; but one could hardly venture so far as that without the slightest encouragement. There is doubt at work in her mind, I see ; probably his age, or some romantic notion about love, which young girls are very apt to have. I hope she will act wisely for herself in this case ; for, of course, it is her own interest solely that I regard.”

Meanwhile the object of Mrs. Walbridge’s solicitude was walking up and down her room, her hands behind her, as had been her habit from her childhood, when in any trouble or perplexity, — a habit which sat with such a quaint, odd air on the small figure, that it had been vastly amusing to older people.

Jessamine heard the crying of the winds outside, and sometimes she went and looked out through the thick driving of the snow, and up to the gray solid mass of cloud overhead, — a sweet, troubled, delicate face at the window-pane ; the girl thinking how, under all the blasts, and cold, and darkness, lay waiting the wonderful Eden of summer, — the green leaves, the slipping of streams among the hill-sides, the springing of grass, the glory of flowers, the singing of the birds through the golden air. If all that could afford to wait God’s time, so could she ; neither storm nor darkness should chill her.



Under the drifting of these thoughts was another, not coming and going, but asking her soul all the time: "Jessamine Holland, are you going to marry this man, John Wilbur?"

She turned and faced it now, as it loomed up before her, resuming her walk, her soft palms locked together behind her.

Did she love him? She began to see that her fate hinged on that point, — that respect, friendliness, trust even, were not that other thing.

She did not love that man as she loved Ross, — never could. If that brother of hers should come to her without a friend or a dollar, forgotten and forsaken of all men and women, her hungry heart would still cling to him out of all the world, holding him crowned, beloved, and precious.

But strip John Wilbur of all the world gave him, — wealth, position, influence, — and what would he be to her? A friend whose character she might honor, whose sorrows she might pity; but beyond that, — nothing. Why was it, then, that the prospect of being John Wilbur's wife had in it something very pleasant? Because, and solely because, he could give her what her soul and senses craved, — wealth, luxury, ease. For these things she would marry him, and not for himself. Her way began to clear now. For these things — these flesh-pots of Egypt — she had no right to sell herself. It was giving up, it is true, something that only God and her own soul knew how much she hungered for. Once the old life at Hannah Bray's rose, in all its bare, stark dreari-



ness before her, barer and drearier than ever, now she had had a glimpse into this new one.

The tears came into her eyes. It seemed so very hard. If she could only love John Wilbur just a little. But it was no use to try. She had no right to share his wealth, the grace and splendor in which he would set her. They were not hers. She would not sell her birthright for them. Could she go to the altar, knowing in her secret soul that it was the man's wealth, not himself, whom she married? It would be sin. She would not lift herself out of her poverty and her loneliness by a false marriage, any more than she would help herself to heaps of uncounted gold which lay in her path, and which belonged to another. In either case she would be a thief, and she, Jessamine Holland, might go mourning to her death for the good things of this life; but she would come by them honestly, or not at all.

So she had come into the light at last. This was the wisdom for which she had prayed last night. Yet it is not always given to women in such straits as hers.

There came a time long afterward when Jessamine Holland looked back and saw that her soul would not have answered so promptly and absolutely her solemn question, if, altogether unconsciously to herself, there had not hovered over her the prescience of what a real love meant.

Mr. Wilbur came the evening of the following day. Jessamine was talking with Duke at the moment, Eva fluttering between them as usual.

The waiter came toward the group, and said, in a low voice, that Mr. Wilbur desired to see Miss Holland in



the parlor. The man evidently had an intuition, that, friendly as was the gentleman's footing in the Walbridge family, this visit was intended solely for the young lady.

Duke and Eva stared, and Jessamine, feeling, with a sudden sinking of heart, that her time had come, made some apology, and hurried up to her own room a moment to collect her thoughts before she went down into the parlor.

You must remember that it was this girl's first offer; and Jessamine was very much of a woman, with all the truth and courage which lay wrought up in that warm little heart of hers. She would have been more or less than one, had she not felt keenly the great compliment which Mr. Wilbur's choice had paid her, choosing the little, quiet country girl from amid all the accomplished and elegant young ladies in the Walbridge circle.

She stood a moment before the mirror, and she realized, as she had never done before, that the face which smiled on her was a very fair one. She smoothed the dark hair about it; and then, opening her drawer, took out a puff of Valenciennes lace, which had been one of her Christmas gifts, and gathered the snowy laces about her throat. Then her conscience, swift and sensitive, called to her, "Jessamine, Jessamine, what are you doing that for? Why do you seek to look fair in the eyes of this man, whose offer you are now to refuse? Are you weak enough to try to enhance your value and his loss at this moment? It is your duty to take no pains with yourself this night; it would be nobler to try and look as homely as you can."



There was a little struggle, — she was very human, as I said, — then she took up a plain linen collar and pinned at her throat; not even the bit of color there which she usually wore; but that was atoned for by the flush in her cheeks as she went downstairs.

“I believe,” said Eva, drawing near to Duke as Jessamine left the room, “that what Gertrude said the other day was true, after all.”

“What did she say, Eva?”

“That she thought Mr. Wilbur had taken a real fancy to Miss Jessamine. It looks like it now, his just calling and asking for her alone, leaving out all the rest of us. I think it would be sort of nice if — if — now — ”

“If what?” asked Duke, in a very curt tone.

“Why, if they should like each other, and something serious should come of it,” answered Eva, who had a young girl’s natural fondness for lovers and weddings, and who had been brought over to her mother’s way of thinking, “that the age was no great matter, after all.”

“It is too absurd to enter anybody’s thought,” answered Duke, in his most positive and provoking way. “A man old enough to be her grandfather! When girls get to talking, they never show common sense.”

Eva bridled a little at this sweeping condemnation of her sex.

“Girls usually see a good deal quicker into such matters than men, anyhow; and as for Mr. Wilbur, if he isn’t young he’s everything else that’s nice and good, and I would sooner marry him to-night than most of the gentlemen whom I know.”



Mr. Wilbur and Eva had, from the beginning, been on excellent terms.

"You're a child, Eva, and don't know what you are talking about."

Eva's amiability was a good deal nettled by this time, and it must be admitted not without provocation. "If I am such a child, Duke Walbridge," she said, very spiritedly, "I am just over fifteen, and I don't think that is a very infantile age anyhow."

"Nobody would suspect that from your looks or actions."

What had come over Duke to-night? He was not in the habit of talking in this way to his favorite little sister. Eva felt a little hurt, looking up into her brother's face, which had settled into something stern and hard as his voice. There was no use talking to him now; and she went off to join her sisters at the other end of the room, and communicate Mr. Wilbur's arrival.

Meanwhile, Duke Walbridge sat still, as though he had been turned suddenly to stone in his chair. But beneath all the hard whiteness there was a hot life and pain, such as he had never known before. It had come there in the last few moments. What could it mean? He thought of John Wilbur with a sudden flash of hatred, as though the man had done him some horrible wrong; the man who had been an especial favorite of Duke's all through the latter's boyhood. He heard Jessamine Holland's feet coming down the stairs. He thirsted to go out and drag her inside the door, from the very presence of the man who was waiting below. He drew his breath hard



as, listening intently, he heard her enter the room and the door close.

What did it mean that the sister of Ross Holland had power thus to shake his soul to its centre? Was she something to him beyond this, — the sister of the friend who had almost given his life for him?

Duke Walbridge winced under this question which rose in the silence of his soul, and he covered his eyes with his hand, while the blood came darkly into his cheeks, and his heart throbbed like a frightened woman's. Then he thought of Jessamine, and something unutterably strong, and sweet, and tender, flooded his soul. Whether it was bliss or pain he could not tell; but it was an exquisite delight, which made him feel manlier and braver, and yet humbler and tenderer toward all the world.

“What does it mean? What does it mean?” The question going restless and hungry to and fro in his thought, like winds that fall and rise before a storm; and at last he answered, softly, with some feeling which brought the tears into his eyes, “*It means that I love you, O Jessamine Holland!*”

Mr. Wilbur came straight toward the girl, as she entered the parlor; he gave her both his hands, his intent eyes on her face. Despite the linen collar and the lack of color, he thought he had never seen her look quite so pretty before.

“Well, my little friend, have you decided?” he asked.

All the surface vanity and flutterings had slipped away now. She was a woman, with a solemn duty before her. She felt very sorry for him — very sorry for her-



self, too, wondering which would find it the harder to bear.

“Yes, Mr. Wilbur,” said the sweet, steady, sorrowful voice, “I have decided.”

He knew then that it had gone against him. His face changed; he drew back from her. “You will not come to me, Jessamine?” — a great regret in his tones.

Then she told him the simple truth; that she could not come without her heart; she had tried to bring him that, but it could not be.

He tried to argue with her. “Young girls were romantic; and a grave, practical man, such as he was, could not expect to inspire the ardent affection that a young lover would. But he would be content to wait for that, and he believed his tenderness and devotion could make her happiness, and win her love in time.”

She feared she was swaying as she listened. All that he said seemed so natural, so true. The color went down in her face, the tears came into her eyes. There was something yet which she had held back. She told him that now; held up before him her past life, with its loneliness, deprivation on every side; and then she showed to him what the life he offered to her must be in contrast; all the ease, grace, luxury, the world abroad, — the sights and sounds for which she hungered.

“Yet,” lifting up the moved face, bright through all its paleness, “do not tempt me, Mr. Wilbur; I cannot do you and my own soul the great wrong to take what I have no right to, bringing you no heart in return. All the time I should be certain that I was selling myself for



your wealth; that it was that and not you I married. You are a strong man. Be pitiful to me. Help me to be true to myself."

He was walking up and down the room drinking in every word. He came now and stood before her. "Jessamine," he said, "I will love at the beginning enough for us both. You will give me your confidence, your friendship. I will be content with that at first, believing that in due time my reward will come."

For a moment she swayed toward him again. That warm, glowing life beyond stood smiling and waiting for her. She had dealt truly by him, and if, out of the abundance of his love and generosity, he was willing to take her as she must come, why should she hesitate?

But as she sat there looking at him, with her pale, perplexed face, some other thought came to her help; a moment afterward it was embodied in her answer. "No," she said, shaking her head slowly, "it is I that must speak for both of us, — I that must be too truly your friend, Mr. Wilbur, to let you do yourself this great wrong. You are worthy of a woman's whole heart; your tenderness and devotion deserve it. Be satisfied with no less. If, tempted by all you promise me, I should consent to be your wife against my highest convictions, it would not be myself that you would take, but something lowered, untrue, false forever afterward.

"I am tired for rest, I am sick for freedom. I am starved for life's grace and beauty, and the old life makes me shiver as I think of going down into its cold and barrenness, and the one you offer me lies fair as a very



garden of Eden before me. But I dare not go in ; before God, I dare not ! Have pity upon me. Be a man, and help me ; for you can never know all it costs me to refuse this you have asked."

Her hands clasped, her wet face shining up to him through its tears. It roused whatever was generous and noble in the man. He came toward her, he took her little hands in his : —

"My little friend, whom I would have more to me, — but it cannot be, — you have been true and brave to-night, and God will bless you for it. It has been a hard disappointment to me ; but for all that I feel that you are in the right, and that in the end I could never be happy with the wife who did not bring me her heart."

He stopped here and looked at her ; he longed to tell her how freely his ample means were still at her disposal ; how it would delight him to set her youth in pleasant paths afar from those lonely, barren ones, where she had walked so long, but something in her face held his words back.

He drew her to him, kissed her forehead tenderly, put his cheek down to hers, and said, " Good-by, Jessamine," in a way that told her it was for the last time, and then went away.

Duke knew that Mr. Wilbur had been gone more than an hour, when Jessamine re-entered the sitting-room. She came back in her soft way, with some little seriousness in her face. Everybody looked up, for everybody had a suspicion what John Wilbur's errand had been that night.



Mrs. Walbridge was secretly uneasy and curious ; that lady having been out when Mr. Wilbur called ; but the girls had confided the fact to their mother, on her return, with characteristic comments. Jessamine's manner had of late puzzled the lady a good deal. Mrs. Walbridge prided herself on her discernment, but she could not make up her own mind whether Jessamine Holland was going to accept Mr. Wilbur or not. She had a kind of feeling that the girl would do her a personal wrong by refusing him, although she never admitted this to herself even.

"Has Mr. Wilbur gone?" said Eva, almost as soon as Jessamine entered ; a question which nobody else had courage to ask.

"Oh, yes ; he left more than an hour ago," was the quiet answer.

Then everybody knew. Mrs. Walbridge was secretly exasperated.

"That girl must set a very high value on herself, to refuse a man like John Wilbur. Why, if he had wanted my Edith, I don't think I should have demurred."

Happily Jessamine suspected nothing of what was going on in the thoughts of the people about her.

"I began to think you were not coming back this evening, Miss Jessamine," said Duke, as she took her seat. He said it in his kindest way, but then she was used to kind sayings from Duke, because she was Ross Holland's sister, she supposed.

Just now, however, she felt singularly forlorn and homesick ; remembering, too, that the only home she had was the little bare room under Hannah Bray's roof.



“Why, have you missed me?” she asked, half absently, as perhaps she would not had she stopped to think twice.

“Oh, yes; I have missed you very much, Miss Jessamine.” He spoke the word low, and with some singular emphasis of tone that roused her.

She looked up in his eyes, and he smiled on her, his own rare smile of lips and eyes.

It entered her heart like light. It brought the soft flush into her cheeks.

Somehow Duke felt quite at ease now about John Wilbur.

Then they all three fell into the old mood of talking, only softer and graver than usual, it seemed to Jessamine; and she went to her room that night with a heart comforted and lighter, she could not tell why.



## CHAPTER XI.

AGAIN there was company at the Walbridges. This time the arrivals were from New York. A young lady, the only daughter and heiress of a retired banker, "a man whose figures would not foot up short of a million," to quote Mr. Walbridge literally. The young lady was accompanied by her aunt, her mother having died several years previous to this visit. Mrs. Ashburn, sister of the latter, herself a widow, had long resided in the elegant home of her brother-in-law.

The lady had been a youthful companion of Mrs. Walbridge, and the intimacy between the families had survived the tests of matrimony and maternity.

This aunt was a pleasant, conventional woman of the commonplace type. Given the antecedents of wealth, good-breeding, and fashionable society, and the ordinary material is pretty certain to turn out the mould of Mrs. Ashburn. The lady had no children of her own, and her sister's daughter was her idol. Indeed, Mrs. Ashburn was just fitted to act the *rôle* of a doating, most indulgent aunt.

Margaret Wheatley, sole heiress of the banker's million, now in her early twenties, was held in society a very



irresistible girl; indeed, she was of the sort to which young men always apply inflated adjectives.

I never could bring myself to call her beautiful, in the highest sense of that term; yet I confess to sitting for a half hour together watching the girl, and trying to analyze the charm of her face and manner. She always perplexed me. Even now I find it difficult to paint her physical and moral lineaments for you. Yet, come to test her by anything which she would ever accomplish in the world, Margaret Wheatley was not remarkable. There were no strong forces of heart, soul, mind, in the woman.

But there was some subtle personal charm about her, — a charm of speech, motion, manner, which must be taken into large account. She was all glow, grace, life. The white skin, with its clear, wonderful bloom; the blue, large eyes; the deep gold of the hair; the lithe, graceful figure, made their own picture.

There was a brightness, a piquancy in her talk and laughter, which trebled the effect, and which seemed as purely natural as the fragrance which a newly-opened rose pours out from its life into the sunshine of some June morning.

How often I have watched Margaret Wheatley, asking myself whether this bright, singular attractiveness of hers was a thing of nature or of art, never without a little secret twinge of remorse before I left the question; and to this day I have never answered it to my own satisfaction. But, at any rate, it served its purpose in the world.

Perhaps, if you come to look closely into the matter,



the long preservation of the Walbridge and Wheatley friendship owed itself as much to the social prosperity and dignity of both houses as to anything else. Adversity on either side would have been likely to chill it; but it flourished greenly during its long summer, the ladies seldom visiting the city without passing a few days at the elegant up-town mansion of the banker.

This visit of Margaret and her aunt, though long solicited, occurred rather unexpectedly. The truth is, the father had taken a sudden alarm at the gay life and late hours in which his daughter was indulging.

The season was not half through, and, looking up the splendid vista, the banker saw a vast avalanche of gayeties and fashionable dissipations about to overwhelm his daughter. That, at least, was the way in which it looked in his eyes, and the man resolved on a sudden retreat.

"The child will be broken down before the winter is over," he said to his sister-in-law. "Get her out of all this."

So there were a few telegrams exchanged; and so it came to pass that Margaret Wheatley came in midwinter to the Walbridges.

No girl, unless it might be Jessamine Holland, in a totally different way, had ever got on so well with Duke as did this Margaret Wheatley. She was not just like other girls; she amused and interested him. She talked with him just as freely as she did with his sisters, without any apparent affectation, certainly without any morbid self-consciousness; for all of which Duke liked her.



Then there was the old family friendship, which was a tie of more or less strength between them.

Margaret, it is true, had not visited at the Walbridges since she was a little girl, when Duke had been her cavalier on all occasions. They had hardly met since that time, but there were old memories to renew, which Margaret did, bringing out their lights in that pleasant sparkle of talk, which, if you came to remember it afterward, or to write it down, would sound very trifling; but then Duke enjoyed it at the time, and — so did everybody else.

It was gayer than ever at the Walbridges. What a bright, long holiday life was, Jessamine thought, with such people as these! She never could have conceived anything like it in the old days in Hannah Bray's cottage. She must go back to that before long, with a little shiver. "But I will take what the good God sends me now," bravely and wisely putting the rest behind her.

She was glad, too, that Margaret Wheatley had come. The two girls got on remarkably well together, though I think they were both something of a perplexity to the other, provided Margaret Wheatley ever could be perplexed about anything; and here again I am in the dark.

A million of dollars, however, was something that Jessamine's thought was forever tugging at, but never grasping. It seemed to her such an infinite amount of money, that the wonder was, anybody could be comfortable under its weight, could go to sleep in the



nights and rise up in the mornings, and sail smoothly along the days under such overwhelming possessions and responsibilities. It was evident nothing of that sort disturbed Margaret Wheatley; "but then she was nurtured in riches, and I in poverty," mused Jessamine Holland; "that makes the difference between us."

It seemed to Jessamine, too, about these days, that there grew up something fainter than a shadow betwixt her and Duke Walbridge. She tried to shake off the impression, would not admit it even to herself, but we know how very faint a film of cloud will blur out some of the stars; and sometimes, it seemed to Jessamine that she missed some of the stars, a very few, from her sky.

Duke's care and attention suffered no abatement; but was it fancy that their talk did not flow quite so easily as before; that there was some reserve in his manner? "Of course it was," Jessamine said to herself.

But she was not correct here. From the moment that Knowledge, awful in its power and meaning, had shone upon the soul of Duke Walbridge, some new reverence and awe toward the woman, whom of all the world he loved, had taken possession of him. He could not look at her, treat her with quite the old freedom, when she was so sacred and set apart in his thought, in his heart.

He felt, too, a new sense of unworthiness in Jessamine's presence, as though he had been guilty of temerity in daring to love her. Should he ever take courage to tell her of this? his breath always choking when he thought



of it, and so there was a certain relief in turning to Margaret Wheatley, and taking in the cool, fresh breezes of her talk, though all the time Duke's ear was strung to the slightest note of one voice, to the sound of one foot-fall; he knew when it went and when it came, and what it brought and carried with it.

Meantime other eyes and ears were alive to Duke's intimacy with the heiress of a million. The words sounded very pleasantly to Mrs. Walbridge. She knew all they represented of splendor, influence, power.

"Mother," said Edith, one day when the two ladies were alone for a half hour, "a bright idea has popped into my head."

"Well, dear, what is it?"

"If our Duke now, would only fall in love with Margaret, what a splendid thing it would be! — a million of dollars doesn't often come with a bride's hand; but it's locked up in hers, and some family must have the fortune, and I don't see why we haven't as good a right to it as anybody else."

"I see no reason why we have not; but Duke is such a curious compound I can never fancy him falling in love with any woman, and long ago I devoted him to old bachelordom."

"He's so odd and obstinate, one wouldn't dare to approach the matter with him, just as one would with most people, I know," said Edith; "but, with such a chance as this, it is a burning shame to let it slip, — just think, mamma, a million of dollars!"

"I know. Nothing would gratify me more than to



have Margaret Wheatley for my daughter-in-law. She is in all respects the kind of wife I should select for Duke; but sons do not often consult their mothers' tastes in that regard, and Duke must choose for himself."

Mrs. Walbridge was not aware that the banker's million gave additional lustre to the daughter's virtues and graces.

"Do you mean, mamma, that you have ever suspected Duke fancied Jessamine Holland?"

"I have never made up my mind that he did; although, if the relations betwixt them were not just what they are, I should long ago have feared the result of their intimacy. But under the circumstances I could not interfere."

"Well," said Edith, with a great deal of tart decision, "nothing would provoke me more than to find the wind set in that quarter. If her brother did save the life of mine, that is no reason I should want her for a sister-in-law, as I can see."

"That is very true, my dear. I was strongly annoyed at Miss Holland's declining the offer which I am persuaded she received the other night. I have felt some anxiety lest a regard for Duke had something to do with the refusal."

"She's not coming into the family if I can prevent it," — complacently surveying the small foot encased in an elegant slipper. "What would she bring to us? Neither family, position, wealth, anything that we naturally desire for our only son and brother."

"It would be the keenest of disappointments to me to



have anything of the sort happen," added the mother. "I have tried to think there was no reason to apprehend it."

"I don't believe there is, mamma. Duke and Margaret seem to be getting on finely together, and I know he is a great favorite with her aunt."

"Ellen would no doubt take into account the old friendship, which would make a union between the families doubly pleasant," supplemented Mrs. Walbridge.

"How proud and delighted I should be, mamma, to have the thing really happen! It's a wonderful chance for Duke, if he only knew it. How well, too, it sounds: 'My brother's wife, the heiress of the millionaire!' I don't intend Jessamine Holland, that little country girl, from some obscure town that nobody ever heard of, shall frustrate all our designs and ambitions."

Mrs. Walbridge might sometimes have reproved such energetic language as this; but she was now a good deal displeased with Jessamine, and secretly a little uneasy too.

"Duke's likings are very stubborn things. If he should take a fancy to Miss Holland, it would be no easy matter to manage or circumvent it."

There was a look in Edith's handsome face at this remark of her mother's, which would have startled one familiar with it. There was some latent power in the girl, with which it would not be well to collide, — a strong will not easily daunted, — a passionate force which would probably never have much scope or development in her quiet New England life and training, but which three



centuries ago, in the court of Catharine de Medici, would have offered a field of intrigue to her talents, and made her a power in the splendid courts and stormy cabals of that age, and perhaps added her name to that company of beautiful, gifted, bad women whose names echo down to us across the centuries, alike the glory and the misery of their time.

“At any rate, I have set my mind on having our family win this prize, if I can accomplish it; and Jessamine Holland shall not stand in my way.”

“Don’t start on a crusade against any imaginary foe, Edith. I am still inclined to think that Duke and Miss Holland regard each other only as friends, and it is quite absurd to waste any feeling over phantom evils. Then, too, you know Miss Holland will leave us now in a few weeks.”

“Yes; and she will descend into the original obscurity from which Duke’s jumping into the sea seems to have lifted her for a time.”

“Sh — sh — you shock me,” replied her mother. “I never saw you so ill-natured. That is not the way to speak of the sister of the youth who saved your brother’s life.”

Mrs. Walbridge, to her honor, was more energetic in her reproof, because she had a secret sympathy with her daughter’s feeling.

Edith, too, had the grace to be a little ashamed of her speech. “I will own I was aggravated, mamma, or I should not have expressed myself so strongly; nevertheless, Jessamine Holland, I’m ready to help you to a hus-



band, so that it be not my brother; for I have set my heart on Duke's marrying Margaret Wheatley."

When her daughter echoed so fully the sentiments of her own soul, Mrs. Walbridge could not find it in her heart to dissent, and changed the subject.

Jessamine Holland and Margaret Wheatley took, as I said, a fancy to each other, and the former was always content to sit still and listen to the playful sallies which frequently ran high betwixt Duke and his guest.

Jessamine enjoyed their talk over the old childish days when they were little boy and girl together, and Margaret had made her first visit at the Walbridges. She would sometimes contrast her life at that time with that of these people. It was only a little while ago, — her memory slipping down the years softly as boats slip from the wide harbor down to the great sea. The price of one of Margaret Wheatley's dresses would have made her household rich as princesses in that old time when the dreadful problem to be solved day by day was, how to keep soul and body together, and a shelter over their heads.

It made her feel sadly, sometimes, to think she had no merry childhood to talk about as other people had; every scene was enveloped in that dark atmosphere of poverty, of which Margaret Wheatley had no more idea than the birds whom God feeds, or the French princess who said, "The people starving for bread? Why don't they eat cake then?"

Duke Walbridge seemed all this time in wonderfully high spirits. The truth was, there was some new life



entering his soul, which quickened all his faculties; and there was a certain pleasure and relief in jesting with Margaret Wheatley; his thoughts going sometimes to himself: —

“You are bright, and pretty, and piquant, old play-fellow, and I like you; and it’s a wonder that they haven’t spoiled you utterly, betwixt all the praise, and pleasure, and prosperity; but I have my doubts whether one would find much heart, brave, and strong, and tender, under all the charm and the brightness.

“Ah! my one lily, with whom all women cannot compare, you sit quiet to-night, and the stillness is upon your face, which tells me your thoughts are touching close upon pain; they have gone down into your lonely childhood, or far off to Ross. Your thoughts do not come to me, and mine do not reach your heart; but for all that, Jessamine, your influence is all about me, tender, and sacred, and exalting. You are the woman to strengthen, purify, redeem, my manhood. You inspire me with a new life that is better than the old, with its dreams and disgusts, its weakness and incoherence. You are the angel passing by the gates, and the air is full of myrrh and spikenard. O Jessamine, if I should unlock the doors and call, would you come in? God alone knows; but he has sent me the vision; and I am stronger and better for beholding you whether he gives you to me or to another.”

You would not have guessed these thoughts were thronging in Duke’s soul, hearing the badinage that was going on betwixt him and Margaret Wheatley.



Suddenly, Mr. Walbridge's rather sonorous voice lifted itself above the hum in the drawing-room. "This has been a hard winter for the poor," he said. "Manufactories closed — don't pay to keep them running. Thousands of men and women in our great cities turned out of employment!"

Mr. Walbridge was not a great talker; but his speeches were always to the point, and had that practical quality which showed itself in everything the man said and did. The family always listened with great respect when "pa" spoke, all his opinions being held in high estimation by his household.

Margaret Wheatley and Jessamine Holland listened too. One could hardly have imagined a greater contrast than there was between those two girls, with not a birthday between them; the one, with the brightness, color, glow; the other, with the quiet, strong, delicate face.

Margaret really felt as little personal interest in the subjects of Mr. Walbridge's remark as she would in a hive of bees or a flock of sheep. Not that she was really hard-hearted. She gave away all her dresses and finery, as soon as she wearied of them, to cooks and serving-maids, and really thought it was too bad to throw them in the fire, as one of her intimate friends did, "because serving-people should not wear the clothes of their superiors." But poverty she always associated with rags, ignorance, and vice, and it had never entered the soul of the rich banker's daughter that there was any tie of human kindred betwixt her and "that class of people."



Jessamine had listened too. Those words, "out of work," always hurt her. She knew what awful depths of struggle, pain, hunger, cold, — what dreadful shifts of denial and poverty were in them.

She turned now to Margaret Wheatley, speaking out of the fulness of her heart: "What do you suppose will become of those people?"

And Duke, sitting by, heard the question; waited for the answer.

"I don't know, I'm sure; but they will get along as they always have done. There are the benevolent societies and the soup-houses, you know."

"Those will do their part; but there is a class whom these can never reach. I mean those to whose pride and sensitiveness charity is bitter as death."

"Oh, my dear Miss Holland, those interesting, unfortunate people are never found out of books. Plenty of people who are in the habit of dispensing charities assure me they never came across one of those fine specimens of poverty; that the real ones are always coarse, stolid, ignorant; the other sort are only author's idealizations; but they do make a story delightful."

Jessamine looked at the girl in a kind of a mournful amazement. Could anybody live in God's world, and hold such a faith as that?

Still, it was all, no doubt, Margaret Wheatley's education. Jessamine did not easily believe evil of any one; and the banker's daughter had been singularly cordial to her from the beginning.

"I think," she said, "one might dispense charities



through a whole lifetime, and never meet with one of those cases of what you call 'interesting poverty;' but for all that they are in the world as well as in story-books; though they will not be likely to haunt soup-houses or benevolent societies."

"I wish some of them would; I should be so very glad to assist such people out of their troubles;" not dreaming she was addressing one, who, without any great elasticity of imagination, might even now be included in the class of whom she spoke.

Jessamine made one more effort. "It is pitiful, too," she said, "to think of the young girls employed in those great cities, wearing away their youth and hope, their very lives, in toiling early and late for a mere pittance, just enough to give them food, and a bit of dreary back attic for a shelter. I think of them in stores, and shops, and factories, shivering through the early dawns to their long days' toil; I think of them going to their comfortless homes, weary and faint, at night; and they are women with souls and hearts like yours and mine, Miss Wheatley."

The young lady moved a little uneasily. Nobody had ever talked to her in just that way before. She thought Miss Holland a little singular; "but, then, poor thing, she had never been in New York."

"Of course those things are very bad," she answered, feeling that she must say something. "But those people are used to it, and it doesn't seem to them at all as it does to us."

Jessamine smothered a sigh. She thought she could



understand now how very gracious and beautiful women, of whom she had read, queens and princesses, with vast wealth and power, had no pity for the people, because they could not understand them.

Duke Walbridge had listened to the talk too, and had his own thoughts about it, which would have greatly amazed everybody else.

Mrs. Ashburn, Margaret's aunt, happened to overhear the conversation also. That it made some impression on her was proved by her remarking, the next day, to Mrs. Walbridge, when Jessamine happened to be away, "Isn't your young friend a little singular, Hester?"

"I think she is, Ellen. The fact struck me the first time I saw her, and the impression has always continued; but then the circumstances did not admit of our being critical, as we might be in the case of most young ladies."

"Of course not," answered the lady. She had heard the story of Jessamine's introduction into the Walbridge family.

Mrs. Ashburn was a pretty woman, with very lady-like manners, and a face which still looked youthful under its becoming lace and flowers.

"I think, mamma, Miss Holland is really pious," said Eva, who had an instinctive feeling that "singular" was not an adjective Mrs. Walbridge would regard as complimentary applied to her own daughters, or Mrs. Ashburn to her niece.

"I hope we all are that, my daughter," answered



Mrs. Walbridge, with a rather amused but benignant smile.

“Oh, but, mamma, I don’t mean pious in the way you do; but really so, away down in her heart; not nice, respectable piety, but the sort that makes one conscientious in word and act, — that makes one pitiful and tender to all who are in suffering, and that would dare something and sacrifice something for what was right and true.”

Eva had gone on in her earnestness, not considering whom her words were hitting.

There was a moment’s silence, as she paused, and then Gertrude said, half satirically, half reproachfully, “Why, Eva, do you mean mamma’s piety is not of the right kind?”

“Oh, no, indeed! I wouldn’t of course say that; only it is not of the same kind as Miss Holland’s; that is — I mean — I mean —”

Poor Eva! she began to see the conclusions toward which she was stumbling, and could not find her way out.

“You mean, Eva,” said her mother, “that young girls, when they talk too much, are apt to get themselves into deep waters.”

“But, mamma,” still feeling that she owed her mother an apology, “I did not mean to say anything against *your* sort of piety.”

It was said so earnestly that, taken together with the words, there was a general laugh, in which Mrs. Walbridge could not help joining, though Eva’s speech had



been far from pleasing to the mother. It seemed to the lady that her self-complacency had a good many shocks of late, and in one way and another she associated them with Jessamine Holland, innocent as the girl was of any connivance in the matter. But Eva's speech did not increase Mrs. Walbridge's regard for her young guest; and, although the lady would not admit it to herself, she had a little secret feeling that perhaps Eva had stumbled on a truth. All this time you must fancy to yourself the liveliest of households, some new excitement going on all the time: parties and drives, dinners and suppers, for the advent of the New York guests had brought a new element of gayety into the household; and amid all this swift flying of weeks, the winter began to turn its face toward the spring, the days lengthened, and Jessamine Holland told herself it was time to begin to think of turning toward the russet cottage whose front faced the hills.

How she could take up the old dreariness of that life again Jessamine could not conceive, contrasting it with the present, so smooth and fair, despite a few drawbacks which Jessamine tried to put in the background, gathering the honey from her little flower of life while it was yet summer time.



## CHAPTER XII.

ONE day, at a little lunch-party given by the Walbridges, who were fond of improvising things of this sort, Jessamine met a new guest. It had cost the Walbridges a little struggle to invite her, the former was well aware; but the lady held a golden key, which proved equal to unlocking the awful front door between the carved lions.

Jessamine had heard the lady's name frequently this winter, her antecedents having been fully discussed in the Walbridge circle; and the gossip floating in Jessamine's way, there had grown around it a half-curious, half-pitiful feeling for its subject. Mrs. Kent was young, and extremely pretty. She owed to that last fact her prosperity and social elevation.

She was not coarse, as some people tried to intimate, — a graceful figure; a fair, girlish face, full of fresh bloom; eyes like the sky in some sunny May day that hangs close upon June, and soft, golden hair about it, — it was a face which vaguely reminded one of the last queen of the house of Valois.

Mrs. Kent was the wife of a man richer, report said, even than the Walbridges. Three years before, she had been a factory girl in an adjoining village, and her hus-



band was a man at least twenty-five years her senior, a shrewd, good-natured, portly man, with a wonderful gift for turning everything he touched to gold. He had risen from poverty and obscurity by dint of this faculty; he had been all over the world, engaged in varieties of business, which had been uniformly successful.

Mr. Kent saw the girl as she came by chance into the counting-room of the foreman of the factory, with whom the former happened to be conversing in the absence of the owner, whom he had called to see. The young girl was a little excited, and the blue eyes, and the fair cheeks, and the golden hair dawned like a vision of almost unearthly loveliness on the gaze of Richard Kent.

He was not a man of much sentiment; but, to use his own words, "he could tell a pretty woman whenever he saw her;" and of late the man who had tumbled all around the world, intent only on making his fortune, but with a certain good-nature at the bottom, whose salt had saved him from turning into a mere grasping miser, with no love but gold, no thought but gain, — of late this man had begun to wonder in a vague sort of fashion whether, after all, it would not pay better to anchor himself down somewhere in a pleasant home, with a pretty little wife, and enjoy in a new fashion some of the money which he had been tumbling over the world all his life to win.

The face of the little factory girl, with its sunny brightness, shone upon him at just the right time; that visit to the counting-office settled her future.

The girl was a favorite with the foreman, for her pretty face and her bright, modest ways, and when he found the



rich gentleman staring at her, he good-naturedly introduced the two, and there were some very becoming blushes on one side, and some rather clumsy attempts at conversation on the other.

But the matter did not end there. The bright eyes and the pretty bloom haunted the dreams of Richard Kent as persistently as though he had just scaled the high wall of his early twenties, and supplanted the bargains on which his thoughts had successfully revolved for so many years.

The result was, that, one evening at the close of the working hours, the gentleman appeared at the door, and, to her infinite amazement, walked home with the young factory girl.

The acquaintance progressed swimmingly after that.

The factory girl was an orphan, lonely, homeless, and with only distant kin in the world. She had been brought up in a back country town, with her widest knowledge of life gathered during the year in which she had been employed in light work at the factory; her keenest interest had been to save money enough from her board to indulge in an occasional cheap dress, and bright flower or ribbon to set off the pretty face.

All this appealed to some chivalry and tenderness far down in the blunt, good-natured soul of the man whose life was settling toward its fifties.

Richard Kent was a shrewd man, and, though he had a homely bronzed face, and his thick, dark hair and beard was all overshot with gray, he succeeded very soon in making himself look handsome in the eyes of the factory



girl. In a courtship of this sort, there were no long, conventional preliminaries to go through with.

The man told the girl one day, in his blunt, straightforward fashion, that he wanted her for his wife, and though he was not a young, dapper lover, he had a good, strong, honest heart that was ready to take her right into it, and make her as happy as a faithful, manly love ever could make woman, provided she could take him on trust, without any of the fine speeches which they said were the things that always won quickest the ear and heart of a woman.

The factory girl listened in a confusion of amazement, delight, bashfulness, that made her look prettier than ever. She glanced at the broad, stalwart figure by her side. Then the true woman in her woke up for the first time. She placed her hands in the strong, large ones, the tears came into her eyes, and she said, with a sudden seriousness and dignity altogether new to the factory girl, "I'm very ignorant; I've never had any chances to make anything of myself; but if you're willing to take me as I am, I'll try very hard to be a good wife to you."

There was better promise for the womanhood to come, in the simple pathos of that answer, than there would have been in the one which many a fine lady might have had ready to the suit of the rich man, and he knew it. In less than a month they were married. The sudden transition would have tested the grain of any nature, and it was not strange that the factory girl's head was a good deal turned by the unaccustomed splendor. She was vain and foolish sometimes, dizzy and dazzled at the sud-



den height to which she had mounted. But she kept her husband's love and respect through it all, which was certainly to her credit, for he had a native shrewdness at the bottom which was not easily deceived in its estimate of people.

Richard Kent lavished diamonds and handsome dresses on his bride, and she had good taste, which had showed itself in the old days of her factory adornings, and which kept her from any gorgeous displays of toilet, in the midst of all the sore temptations which her husband's loose purse-strings afforded her. Richard Kent's boyhood had been passed near the town where the Walbridges resided, and as he had certain agreeable associations with the vicinity, he purchased a delightful site outside of the town, and here, in the midst of pleasant grounds, he built himself a spacious home, and settled down to enjoy his wealth with the young wife, of whom he grew every day fonder and prouder.

Here, in a little while, a baby came to steady the mother's heart and brain. Nature, at any rate, had dealt kindly by Mrs. Kent, and beneath the pretty face there were thought and feeling, which would assert themselves when her eyes should grow a little accustomed to the new dazzle of her position.

She had been learning many things since she left the factory, too, and among these were a very stinging, but perhaps not unwholesome, sense of her deficiencies. These were, in truth, deplorable; the backwoods' school having inducted her into a little reading and spelling, and left her there before her tenth birthday. Mrs. Kent



grew slowly awake to the fact, that she sometimes made mistakes in conversation, and mispronounced words, which the gracious ladies who invited her to their parties waxed merry over when her back was turned. This knowledge galled Mrs. Kent to the quick. She was angry over it, and humiliated, too, and the poor young thing, in the midst of her elegance, had no friend to advise her, and she shrank from telling her husband the trouble over which she brooded, and it was one which the kind, blunt nature of the man would hardly understand.

“If she could only sing and play,” Mrs. Kent thought, pondering the matter; but she had no gift there, and, if she told the unvarnished truth, she had enjoyed the opera quite as much for its display of fine dresses as she did for the music.

That there were some forces in her of energy and resolution, Mrs. Kent proved by setting herself to study; but it was very slow work with no teachers of any sort.

Meanwhile the lady's tact and observation preserved her from many egregious errors, but sometimes, despite her care, they would slip out; and as her wealth made Mrs. Kent conspicuous, it became fashionable to criticise her in a small way, and there were people mean enough to indemnify themselves for admitting her into their society by repeating her mistakes. At any rate, Jessamine Holland thought no fault could be found with Mrs. Kent's deportment, whatever were the defects of her education. She was as thoroughly ladylike in presence and bearing as any of the young ladies in the company.



During the talk somebody ambitiously quoted a passage from Dante's "*Inferno*;" and another lady, quite innocent of Mrs. Kent's antecedents, turned to her, saying, playfully, "No doubt that is all very fine; but I must have Dante turned into a mould of Anglo Saxon, or else he is all Greek to me."

Mrs. Kent was a little nervous. She must make some reply, and fancying that the lady's remark had given her the clew, and that she was sure of her ground this time, she answered, "I am no wiser than yourself. I never read your poet. I only know he was one of the old Greek authors."

The next moment Mrs. Kent became conscious that she had made a tremendous blunder. The ladies around her plumed themselves on their good-breeding, but, for all that, there was a stir, a significant lifting of eyebrows, an amused smile about the circle, and the poor little lady felt stung and humiliated to the quick.

Jessamine sat near her. She saw, with a sudden flush of indignation, the smile of the ladies. She knew how shallow was the cultivation of most of the elegant women before her; a little music, a smattering of French, a few of the surface accomplishments which pass current in fashionable circles, and your line had struck the bottom of these women's culture. What right had they to self-complacency or scorn over the factory girl, who had improved her small opportunities far more wisely than they?

Jessamine Holland had a courage that, when roused, would have made her dauntless in the presence-chamber



of kings. Her eyes, in a blaze of indignation, went around the circle, and then she turned, with her clear voice and her quiet grace, to the lady: "Mrs. Kent, I think you did not hear the name. We were speaking of Dante, not of a Greek author," she said.

"I beg your pardon; I did not understand," replied Mrs. Kent, and there was a sudden flash of gratitude in the blue eyes that looked up at Jessamine.

After that, of course there was no more to be said; and although each lady present understood, as before, the fact of Mrs. Kent's ignorance, each one felt, too, a secret uneasiness. The courtesy which had not presumed on the ignorance of a guest, and which had so gracefully turned it into a misapprehension of the right name, was something finer and higher than anything to which Jessamine's hearers had attained. But the lesson was not without its service; for Mrs. Kent's setting Dante among the old Greek poets was never alluded to again, as it would have been with plenty of contemptuous laughter and pity, if Jessamine had not come to the rescue.

"That first sentence was not just the truth," said Jessamine's conscience a little later. She had not thought of that at the moment.

Several times, so many indeed that Jessamine was quite ashamed of herself, her eyes met Mrs. Kent's.

"How singularly pretty and attractive she is! The only wonder, that with her antecedents she carries herself so well. Poor thing! Even wealth does not bring all one wants; and she must be in perpetual fear of mortification, from women whom her husband's wealth has forced



to acknowledge her. How that smile of theirs stung me, as though it had been a personal insult!" went Jessamine's thoughts.

Mrs. Kent was perfectly aware how Jessamine had flung herself into the breach, in hearty defence of a stranger. It stirred all that was grateful and generous in the little woman's nature. A few commonplace remarks only were interchanged before the company separated. When Mrs. Kent had made her adieux to her hostess, she approached Jessamine, and said, with a pretty kind of eagerness, "Miss Holland, I am strongly desirous of knowing more of you."

Frankness of this sort would be sure of being met half way by Jessamine Holland; and she replied, playfully, "Your desire granted, my dear Mrs. Kent, might produce quite the opposite effect."

"You will allow me to be the judge of that," answered the lady; and then she added an urgent entreaty that Jessamine would give her the pleasure of an interview at her own house. She would send the carriage at any hour Miss Holland would appoint.

With a crowd of engagements which occupied the days and evenings, Jessamine found it difficult to command two or three hours outside of the family. Time was so absorbed by this butterfly existence, whose only aim was a vivid, æsthetic enjoyment of life. Was it very much better than the butterfly's that flashed through the golden summer air the purple beauty of its wings, and gladdened the eyes which saw it hovering among the flowers?

But Mrs. Kent was so thoroughly in earnest that Jes-



samine appointed a time for the visit, a couple of days later. Her going might be unceremonious; and the Walbridges might have their opinions about it, she reflected; but for all that she would go.

The Kents lived several miles out of town. However people might criticise them in some ways, they could but admit that the owner had displayed good taste in the site he had chosen, and the home he had reared on it. It was quiet, substantial, elegant, and Jessamine sighed a little to herself as she mounted the stone steps, and wondered whether she should ever have a home too, — a real home, with nothing so grand as this, but a bit of a cottage, with half-a-dozen rooms, and balconies, — a cottage among green hills, half smothered in vines.

I suppose we all have some time our horizon outside of the real daily world in which we live. This one of the cottage was Jessamine's.

Inside, too, amid the general elegance, there was little to find fault with. The colors were rather too fresh and bright to suit people of quiet tastes, but nothing vulgar.

Mrs. Kent's greeting was more like that of an old friend than an acquaintance whose knowledge of her guest was confined to a single interview. The lady had secured herself from interruptions this morning, and it was surprising how much the young matron and the young maiden found to say to each other.

Jessamine felt as though she was breathing a draught of her native country air; and it was very pleasant, for the Walbridge ceremonies sometimes grew a little irksome.



Mrs. Kent took her guest at last into a small cosey side-room that opened out of the parlor.

“We can talk better, and I always feel more at home than I do in those great parlors.”

“So do I,” said Jessamine. “How nice this is!” — a pleasant home-feeling coming over her as she settled herself down in one of the low easy-chairs.

Mrs. Kent looked at her guest a moment with some thought that flushed her face and widened the blue eyes; then she spoke: “You were very kind to me yesterday, Miss Holland. I could not thank you before all those people; but I shall never forget it of you — never — so long as I live.”

“O Mrs. Kent, it is all not worth speaking of.”

The lady’s lip quivered. “Ah, but it was the way — the brave, generous way — in which you sprang to my defence. You did not join in the smile, nor the look which I saw went around the circle.”

“It was a shame — a disgrace to them!” burst out Jessamine, hotly indignant; “and they pride themselves on their good-breeding!”

Mrs. Kent drew a little nearer, again; and, seeing her face, Jessamine thought, “There is something in this woman beyond what her husband’s money has put there.”

“I know what their friendship is really worth,” she said. “I know it’s the elegant home, and the money, and all those things that have compelled them to receive me amongst them. I take their courtesies for just what they are worth; but with you it is different. I said to myself yesterday, ‘If I was only the poor, friendless



factory girl I was two years ago, she would be just as careful not to hurt me; my feelings would be just as sacred in her sight as they are now, — now I'm the wife of a rich man.' ”

“ I should be a miserable wretch if they wouldn't,” answered Jessamine, with hot cheeks.

“ Ah, yes; but the fine ladies in your set, Miss Holland, don't look at it that way; and though I feel that in one sense, at least, I'm above them, yet their contempt for my ignorance hurts, humiliates me. But I never had any kind of a chance, you see,” — the lips quivering again.

Jessamine was so strongly stirred that she could not say one word. She leaned over and touched Mrs. Kent's hand, — a slight movement; but Jessamine had, from her childhood, her own way of doing these small things when her heart went in them. Hannah Bray could tell you about that.

The lady went on: “ I've been thinking a great deal about the matter of late. If I could only set to work and improve myself, make up for the lost time; but I am so utterly ignorant, and it seems so hopeless, and I don't know where to begin. It is very easy to tell you all this. I felt that it would be from the moment when I saw your kind, pitying eyes looking at me yesterday.”

Jessamine began to feel that her own poverty had not been of the worse sort. Its iron had entered so deeply into the soul of her childhood and youth, that perhaps it was time for her to learn now the great limitations of the wealth which had been denied to her.

“ I have had my sorrows too; I have known how



hard poverty is also," answered Jessamine, her lips quivering this time.

"I thought you would not have been so tender without you had known," said Mrs. Kent, eagerly. "Yet your poverty must have been so very different from mine — so very different;" and she shook her head mournfully, and Jessamine could make no reply.

In a moment the lady looked up eagerly again. "If there is any way in which I can make up for these deficiencies, but it seems so late to begin now; yet I would work very hard. I cannot bear the thought that some day my little boy upstairs may live to know they are laughing at his mother's ignorance, and be ashamed of her."

Her face worked, the tears and the sobs coming up together behind the words. She had touched the quick of her pain now, — the mother-love, the mother-pride, that had roused and steadied the whole woman; that had conquered the vanities and affectations, and that would be the secret spring feeding any new purposes of growth and self-development in Mrs. Kent.

Jessamine answered out of her quick impulse of help and pity, "But it is not too late to redeem all that has gone."

Mrs. Kent looked up with an eager light breaking all over her pretty, tearful face. "Do you really think so? That is what I wanted to know — to ask you. I am ready to do anything; it is not too late, then?"

Jessamine hesitated a little. It was no light question that Mrs. Kent had asked. That she would find the



work one to test all her mental and moral force, Jessamine saw clearly. No sudden impulse, no strong but evanescent enthusiasm, would avail her here. The slow, wearisome climbing at first; the shaping her habits of studies; the ease, the pleasure, the luxury about her; the calls and plans of each day, would be so many conspiring forces against this work of self-improvement. Had the sweet-faced little woman sitting there the strength and the courage to conquer all these circumstances, and gather out of her daily life, out of its ease and pleasure, three or four of its best hours for slow, hard toil of this sort? Jessamine doubted. And her answer kept faith with herself.

She set the matter in its true light before the young matron. It was a noble impulse which possessed her; Jessamine's whole soul did it honor; but she could not disguise the great lions which stood in the way. Knowledge was not easily won; habits of study were not easily formed. The beginning especially was slow and hard. A steadfast, unswerving purpose alone would avail her. Very few women were equal to work of this sort. The duties and the delights of life wore away the hours, and it was a great thing to look them in the face, and say, resolutely, "I give up all the rest for the sake of knowledge!"

Mrs. Kent drank in every word. A good many feelings, however, in her face. There was a little silence.

"But if you were in my place — I know you will tell me truly — what would you do? Should you think the work and the struggle would pay in the end? Would



you not give up the rest, the ease, and the pleasure, for what at last the knowledge would be to you ? ”

Thus adjured, what could Jessamine reply ? A sudden steadfastness grew around the line of the sweet mouth ; a new strength steadied and fired the whole face. “ Yes,” she said ; “ for myself, I should look the facts in the face, and I should put down the love of ease, of luxury, the pursuit of pleasure, all things that eat away the days, the months, and the years, saying, ‘ God helping me, I will seek for knowledge,’ sure that if I lived to be forty or fifty years old, I should feel, ‘ I am not sorry I chose the wiser and the better part.’ ”

“ And so I will choose, and so I shall feel, then,” said Mrs. Kent, and her face flashed into something which no one had ever seen there before.

Jessamine could not discourage her. She thought of the little boy upstairs, and it seemed that he was pleading with her for his mother ; that the sweet baby face which she had never seen looked at her half reproachfully, saying, “ She has placed her future in your hands. As you say, so she will do. Tell her to be not alone the mother I can love, but one whose mind and thought I can honor and revere, as you would have your own child, if God should ever give you one.”

The baby lay upstairs, nestled in snowy laces, smiling among his pleasant dreams ; but, for all that, Jessamine heard his voice pleading. So she could not find it in her heart to discourage Mrs. Kent ; still, she would not make herself the rule for another, which it is very hard not to do in our youth. And she answered, “ I should choose



the study, Mrs. Kent, because I love it best. It is not thus with all women, — women, too, who make good wives and mothers; neither is knowledge everything. The heart and the character, in the long run, are a great deal more.”

“But the knowledge makes both wiser and better?” asked Mrs. Kent.

“Always wiser and better, if rightly used.”

“Then I am making the right choice. I shall not repent it,” added the young wife.

“But there is another way,” added Jessamine; “an easier one. There are many young ladies in society who have a superficial knowledge, that with a certain feminine tact and good sense manages to get them on very nicely. You can procure a French teacher, take a course of light, pleasant reading, and with your quick perceptions you would soon find yourself on a level with these people, and study would not be the hard task which I have described it.”

“But would you, in my place, remember, make up your mind to that course?”

There could be but one reply. The flash in her face again. “No, I would go honestly to work; I would make no shifts of this sort; I would commence at the foundations.”

“I am utterly ignorant,” said poor Mrs. Kent. “I know nothing of geography or grammar. I can read and spell, and Richard says I write a pretty hand; that is all.”

Jessamine’s sweetest smile came out on her face.



“The less you know, the greater will be the victory,” she said.

“And — and how long will it take to lay the foundations, — form these habits of study?” asked Mrs. Kent.

She had chosen her confidant wisely. Jessamine had fought much of the battle herself.

The girl hesitated a moment. “I think, if you were to study persistently three hours a day, for one year, with some judicious teacher, you would have gained the battle. There would be much to do after that; but, as I said, the beginning is the hardest.”

Mrs. Kent rose up and placed her hands in Jessamine’s; her face was pale, but a great light shone out of it. “Thank you, my dear friend,” she said. “I will study so for the next year.”

Just then the bell rang. The coachman had called for Miss Holland. She looked at her watch in amazement, and saw that the two hours had slipped away while they had been talking.



## CHAPTER XIII.

ONLY two days after her first interview with Mrs. Kent, Jessamine found herself again at the lady's residence, — an urgent note, written in a pretty, though rather painstaking, undeveloped hand, having carried her out of town again.

Mrs. Kent met her guest at the door, her face prettier than ever, Jessamine thought, with its pleased, eager welcome.

"You were so good to come, Miss Holland. I have been half frightened at my boldness in sending for you ever since the carriage drove off, fearing what you might think of it."

"My thoughts are not very formidable things at the best," laughed Jessamine. "I cannot conceive how they should ever alarm any human being. This time they resolved themselves into a very feminine curiosity to know what this mystery was at which your message hinted so strongly."

"It is a little plan which came to me night before last; and I have pondered it ever since. You see, I would not do anything of this sort suddenly or rashly," — blushing and smiling.



The two had come into the quiet little alcove room again, where they had their first talk, and where Jessamine had a home feeling.

She was, however, quite in the dark regarding Mrs. Kent's meaning. She therefore added, in her bright, playful way: —

“It must be an awfully solemn matter which required two whole days' consideration. Why, I never gave so much time to any project in my life. I think, if a man should propose to me, I should arrive at an absolute decision in less than half that time.”

Mrs. Kent could not help laughing; but she grew grave in a few moments.

“But this plan which has cost me so much time and thought will never come to anything unless you consent to it, and help me carry it out. I have set my whole heart on it.”

“I shall be very glad to — to serve you in any way that is best for us both,” replied Jessamine, a kind of prescience of responsibility coming over her, and making her seek her words carefully.

Then Mrs. Kent's plan came out, which affected Jessamine in one way almost as vitally as her hostess in another.

The lady had been revolving all her friend had said to her in their last interview, and was certain that Jessamine was the only person in the world who could assist Mrs. Kent to carry out her purposes of study.

The whole matter resolved itself into a most pressing invitation to Jessamine Holland, to come and take up her



abode with Mrs. Kent for the next year, and induct that lady into her studies.

She pleaded her cause with an earnestness, force, and eloquence which really quite took from Jessamine the power to reply after her first amazement at the proposition of her hostess.

Mrs. Kent, like everybody else in the Walbridge circle, knew the history of Jessamine Holland's acquaintance with the family, and that she was an orphan, with no near kin in the world except the heroic brother who had gone to the East Indies to seek a fortune for himself and his sister.

She barely touched on that, however. All the favor was to come from Jessamine, all the bounty to be reaped by herself. She urged her necessity, and insisted strenuously on the fact that Jessamine alone would be a stimulant and support to her in the solemn resolution she had formed of educating herself.

There were teachers to be had, no doubt; but these would not be friends, nor apprehend all the delicate complications of the case. Nobody in the world could do that but Miss Holland; and, besides that, — with another little blush and unsteadiness of lip and voice, — Mrs. Kent was so shockingly ignorant she should be afraid and ashamed to expose all this to a hired teacher, who might go away and ridicule her, as those ladies who prided themselves on their good-breeding had not hesitated to do. Then Jessamine's presence would be a constant inspiration to Mrs. Kent, would encourage, sustain her, when her own faith failed. In the world, in her own home, in



herself also, she would have constant obstacles to encounter, where a friend, who comprehended them all, could alone enable her to be steadfast.

After that first year, which Jessamine had told her would prove the real test, and leave her at its close vanquished or victor, Mrs. Kent could take the reins; but now her hands were too weak and unused to hold them alone. Would Jessamine help her?

All this, and a great deal more, the little lady said, pleading her cause with a wonderful fervor, while Jessamine sat still trying to look calmly at the matter which had been sprung on her so suddenly.

Her answer was doubtful when Mrs. Kent paused: "It has taken me so completely by surprise — there are so many things to consider — my dear Mrs. Kent, you must give me time."

"Oh, yes — only" — and an arch smile came about the young matron's mouth. "You said that it would not take two days to decide in case of a proposal: now this is a far less important matter and I am so impatient."

Jessamine could but admit that her own remark was very shrewdly forged by her hostess into a weapon for that lady's cause; and then the latter went on drawing a most captivating picture of the quiet, happy times they would have together. There was the pleasant, ample house, with the wide grounds, where the summer was coming to work its old Eden miracle afresh, and Miss Holland should be just as much at home as under her own roof, and live her own life with absolute freedom as it pleased her. There should be the three hours for study, an in-



exorable law; and beyond that were walks, and drives, and sails, whenever Jessamine should choose.

They were both young and enthusiastic in different ways, and if the *colour de rose* visions spread enchanted landscapes before them, it was natural enough.

“I would try to make you very happy,” said Mrs. Kent, in a way that was really touching, at the conclusion; “and at least you could come and try it, you know.”

“I am quite overwhelmed by all your goodness,” stammered Jessamine, whose youth and fancy had been quite dazzled with the glowing pictures. “I have no doubt I should be very happy, but — but I wonder what Ross would say!”

Here was an element in the argument on which Mrs. Kent had not counted. She was not at all disposed to leave the matter to the arbitration of somebody on the other side of the planet.

She was simply an impulsive, undeveloped young girl at this time, with a warm heart and a good deal of latent energy under the pretty face. Her instincts were true. She had selected her confidant wisely. Whatever Jessamine might share of ease and luxury in the elegant home, Mrs. Kent would owe far more to her by contact with a finer and nobler nature than any she had ever met, and by its quiet, moulding influences around her life. She needed Jessamine.

“If I could see this wonderful brother of yours, I am sure I could bring him over to my way of thinking; but you will not hold me in suspense while letters can go



around the world and back, to have him decide on a matter of which he could really know nothing. The whole thing might strike him as a foolish vagary, and in any case he must leave it all to your decision."

This reasoning was so sensible that Jessamine could not gainsay it. I think she was glad she could not; but, for all that, she would not rush with hurried feet into this new life, which had risen up suddenly, like a stately palace in the midst of shining gardens, to receive her.

"But your husband, Mrs. Kent, — does he know of this project, and approve it?"

"Oh, yes; Richard is so good, — you have to know him thoroughly to find that out, Miss Holland, — he approves of anything that will make me happy. It is true that he always makes light of my ignorance, with some such answer as this, 'You are wise and smart enough for me. Dolly,' — that is one of his pet names. 'Don't bother that little head of yours about turning into a bookworm;' and talk of that sort. And even if I were to tell him of some of the humiliations which I endure, he would think it all proceeded from narrow envy or jealousy. A man could hardly understand these things as we do."

"Hardly," — wondering whether Ross or Duke Walbridge would not.

"But Richard did not raise the remotest objection to my plan when I laid it before him, and in the end I am certain he will not think the less of me for carrying it out; besides, he will like you as well as I do, almost."

Afterward, Mrs. Kent took Jessamine upstairs, and showed her the room which she had appropriated to her



use in case she consented to become an inmate of the household. It was a bower pretty enough for a princess, instead of a very quiet little country maiden; perhaps less pretentious than the stately chamber which she occupied at the Walbridges, but quite as tasteful and elegant, with its dark furniture, its snowy linen and laces; and its windows, that took in a landscape, whose hills and meadows, with their shining crinkle of brooks and river courses, would be an eternal delight to the eyes of Jessamine Holland. At the foot of the bed, too, just where those radiant eyes would be sure to rest on it when they woke up from the night into the new day, was a sea-picture, — a rare thing, by De Haas, — a long green line of waves writhing up in glittering coils to the beach, like a huge serpent throwing its cold, vast length on the dark, wet sands that sparkled in the light. In the west, the sun was going down in great masses of angry clouds; there was a heave and restlessness of the vast sea, which told one it was girding up its strength to meet the storm that was coming down upon it; there was the snowy glitter of the sea-birds in the distance, and across the bare, reddish headlands.

Jessamine drew in her breath. A sense of ease, of home, and peaceful shelter came softly over her. She thought of the little room at Hannah Bray's, with its bare walls and its clumsy furniture, to which she must go back in a little while. Then she heard Mrs. Kent's voice: "How soon shall you let me know your decision?"

"You must give me one night to sleep over it," an-



swered Jessamine. "That usually clears away my cobwebs of doubt, over any new plans. To-morrow I will write you;" and with this understanding the two young things, so strangely brought together, so singularly in need of each other, parted at the door.

As Jessamine rolled through the grounds, she looked about them with a new interest, and with some new sense of possession. In these few last days the first pulse of the spring had stirred under the earth. She heard a robin singing among the hedges, and with a sudden yearning thrill she saw clusters of "lady's delights," constellations of purple and gold, in the flower-borders at her feet.

Would this earthly Paradise ever really be her home? Was it a dream, whose glowing mirage filled an hour of the night, or something that had really fallen to her human lot? setting herself back in the carriage when she found that her lashes were wet. Only that morning Jessamine had been compelling herself to look the fact in the face that she must return home, and the time was drawing nigh to do this. She would not admit to her most secret thought that there had been any failure of cordiality in the manner of the Walbridges since she first became their guest.

Jessamine Holland was not morbid; but her instincts were sensitive, and if she would have allowed herself to heed them, she might have felt that there was a subtle difference of manner in her hostess, and in that of her elder daughters.

Mrs. Walbridge herself was unconscious of this; indeed, she made a constant effort not to fail in any atten-



tion to her guest; but it was impossible for even that lady to absolutely mask her feelings; and of late she had set her heart on Duke's taking to wife Margaret Wheatley, and she was not certain whether Jessamine Holland stood in the way of this consummation. Sometimes Mrs. Walbridge made herself believe that her fears were groundless; and then again she was less confident of the state of her son's affections. She watched Duke narrowly; she pondered his words, and yet she feared to let fall a hint which should indicate the desire on which she had set her heart.

All this, of course, did not tend to promote Jessamine Holland in Mrs. Walbridge's estimation. The lady must have been glad of any circumstance which would have relieved her from the unwelcome presence of her young guest. Mrs. Walbridge would not admit to herself that she disliked Jessamine Holland; but, for all that, she did, in secret, as we are apt to do those whom we fear may frustrate our dearest plans. And all unconsciously to herself, there was at times a faint chilliness in her tones and manner toward Miss Holland, though that young lady denied it most energetically to herself when her instincts first suggested the fact.

Edith, who sympathized with her mother's feeling, was, perhaps, a little less guarded. Margaret Wheatley she had resolved should be her sister-in-law, and here she was confident of the sympathy of her whole family, with the exception of Eva, who was kept wholly in the dark. She was too young to understand anything of the sort, Mrs. Walbridge said. There was no doubt that Mrs.



Ashburn could be relied on to use all her influence to promote the union of her niece with the son of her friend. Duke was a great favorite with the lady, who had an immense horror of fortune-hunters, and a constant dread lest her niece should be sacrificed to some one of these, his real purpose disguised under graceful bearing and flattering tongue.

Mrs. Ashburn's influence would be no small force in Duke's favor, both with father and daughter. As for Margaret herself, the young man had always been an immense favorite with her from childhood. Everything was auspicious for Duke's suit to a bride with a dowry of half a million to add to her many charms and graces.

Did this unknown stranger, without fortune or friends, whom circumstances had forced on their hospitality, stand in the way of so brilliant an alliance, — one that would do honor to the Walbridge race? "She shall not," muttered Edith; and her haughty face darkened, and her mother listened, and did not reprove her daughter.

Jessamine found, on her return from Mrs. Kent's, that a plan had been concocted by the young people to ride over to the Falls, — a little picturesque torrent of water in a gorge of low, black rocks, a few miles from the city. Doubtless the attraction of the scenery was greatly enhanced by the drive to the waterfall, which wound charmingly among the meadows, with sudden outbreaks and surprises of hill and valley scenery.

Jessamine had frequently been promised a ride to this waterfall when the spring weather opened, though Duke



had been disposed to have a jest, at Eva's expense, over her highly colored descriptions of the size and volume of the stream : " O Eva ! one would think to hear you go on, that we had a companion-piece to Niagara up there among the rocks. It is only a pretty stream of water leaping over the stones from a considerable height ; but, then, small eyes see things in such enlarged proportions ; a cherry once looked bigger in my eyes than an apple does now."

" No doubt it will in mine, when I have attained your venerable age," answered Eva, pertly enough. The brother and sister were always having their badinage over each other's ages, all of which vastly amused Jessamine.

Eva was full of the details of the ride when Jessamine returned. The air was soft as a late May-day, full of sunshine and the fragrance of blossoms. Everybody seemed to take it for granted that Miss Holland would go ; and she would have thought it absurd to demand a more ceremonious invitation.

Of course, it never entered Duke's thought that Jessamine would not be included in the party ; but Edith had made up her mind that morning to weave a little silken net of intrigue about the whole affair. She was resolved that her brother and Margaret Wheatley should occupy the carriage by themselves, if she could compass it. " There is no reason why Miss Holland should see the waterfall on this particular occasion," she said to herself ; " and there are especial reasons why Duke should just at this time be thrown, as much as possible, in Mar-



garet Wheatley's society, with no distracting influences about him."

The eldest daughter of Mason Walbridge would have made an artist in delicate intrigue. This matter required dainty handling, for it would never answer to offend Duke or wound Miss Holland. Edith Walbridge's plan was worthy of herself.

Jessamine stood at the mirror putting on her hat, for the carriages were coming up the drive, when there was a knock at the door, and Miss Walbridge suddenly entered the room.

"Oh, I beg pardon!" — and she started back with a wonderfully well-counterfeited look of surprise. "I did not understand — you are going with us, Miss Holland?" Voice and smile very cordial over these last words, in which, too, was a lurking embarrassment.

"Yes — that is — I was expecting to," answered Jessamine, a little incoherently, surprised and curious. "But is there any reason — I beg you will tell me what your errand was, Miss Walbridge."

"It was a very small matter, a mere misapprehension on my part. I am quite confused, Miss Holland."

She certainly looked so, standing there in her dark, handsome riding-suit; and Jessamine Holland was not by nature suspicious. She always took people at their word.

"I shall not feel comfortable unless you frankly tell me what brought you in here, Miss Walbridge."

"Well, then, as I am caught, mouse-like, in a snug little trap, I suppose there is no way but to make a



clean breast of it," answered Edith, with an air of reluctant frankness.

"I thought you said to Eva at lunch that you had letters to write to your brother, which would prevent your joining our party for the Falls this afternoon; and I have just received some handsome engravings of Spanish mountain and coast views, which I thought might interest you in case you felt lonely before we returned; and I called to say, knowing your taste for anything of the sort, that I had laid them on the library table for your amusement."

This was very kind and thoughtful of Edith. Was it strange that Jessamine Holland's gaze could not penetrate far down into any secret motive which underlaid all the graciousness; that she took the whole with her native good faith?

"I thank you sincerely, Miss Walbridge. It was not strange that you misapprehended me; for I did tell Miss Eva that I had intended to bestow this afternoon on Ross, as the steamer sails day after to-morrow, but that I would break my rules and sit up the best part of the night to write him."

"And — and I have just told Duke — O Miss Holland, I beg you will pardon all my stupidity, and take my place! Really, this ride is quite unimportant to me, I have taken it so many times."

Edith Walbridge seemed confused and distressed. It was like Jessamine to hasten to relieve her.

"Don't think of me in the least, Miss Walbridge; but just enlighten me, and then I am sure we shall be able



to adjust the whole matter ; ” laying down her gloves on the table.

Then Edith went on to say that, in the full belief of Miss Holland’s refusal to accompany them, she had insisted on Duke’s taking the phaeton, which would only accommodate two people comfortably.

“ I thought this arrangement might be pleasanter than to have Eva by his side ; as I presume you are aware, Miss Holland, that a peculiar friendship has always existed between Duke and Margaret Wheatley. She was the only little girl whom he ever heartily fancied, and we used to imagine their childish penchant might ripen into a real attachment ; and, as I have an impression the old feeling may not have quite perished, I managed that they should ride undisturbed to this old haunt of theirs, knowing it was very full of childish associations to both of them. Of course I should never have alluded to this matter if these circumstances had not forced me.”

Edith said this in the most natural way imaginable. Still, she watched covertly the effect of her words on her listener. There was no apparent embarrassment. Jessamine stood quietly and earnestly listening, with no change in her face, except the swift color which was always coming and going, and therefore furnished no criterion on the present occasion.

“ And — and — oh, I begin to see the facts now. Your own carriage will be filled, and so you wish to remain at home to make room for me. You are very kind, Miss Walbridge, but of course that is not to be thought of ; ” and Jessamine took off her hat.



“Oh, do put it on!” pleaded Edith. “I shall not have a moment’s comfort during the ride, and Duke would be so vexed if he knew all this.”

“He need know nothing about it,” answered Jessamine, eager to relieve her friend’s embarrassment. “Just tell him that I am really unable to take the ride this afternoon and finish my letter to Ross, which is the simple truth, and don’t give another thought to this matter.”

Edith, sure of her ground now, demurred and protested; but Jessamine was firm, and at last she was obliged to leave, and she went down secretly exulting over the success of her *finesse*.

“Where is Miss Holland?” asked Duke, a little impatiently, as she joined the group.

“She sent her excuses; but she has concluded that she will remain behind and write to her brother. You know she is the model of sisters, Duke. I can only admire her at a distance now; but perhaps if you were in India I would do the same for you.”

“Why, Miss Holland said she would put off writing her brother until night!” exclaimed Eva, in a voice full of chagrin.

“Well, she has altered her mind, and none of us can induce her to go now,” promptly responded Edith. “You will ride in the phaeton with Margaret, and Eva can come with us,” she added, to her brother.

Duke turned toward the carriage, but his sister hardly liked the expression of his face. There was something dark and grim about it, which was a sure indication that matters had gone wrong with him.



She would have felt still less exultant over the success of her little master-piece of intrigue could she have looked down into her brother's heart and read the thoughts there. "Ah, Jessamine, I am only the friend of Ross in your thought. Shall I ever be more?"

Margaret Wheatley waited for him with her brightest smile, her face set off at its very best, under a mass of flowers and plumes. If there were any sentiment existing between the two, this afternoon was certainly the time to inspire it. There were all the old childish associations linked with this ride, for long ago Duke had driven Margaret Wheatley over to the waterfall with his new pony, and was as proud of his prowess as a young knight of the spurs he had just won; and the little girl's admiration for her boy-cavalier still exercised a certain magic over the young woman.

Every mile of the road revived some old memory, and the banker's daughter had never in her life been more fascinating than she was on that drive. There was little doubt that Duke Walbridge held at that time the fate of Margaret Wheatley in his hands; that, had he chosen to urge his suit with eager heart and eloquent tongue, the bird with the beautiful plumage and the golden nest would have dropped easily into his outstretched hand.

But, with all his faults, Duke was not self-complacent, and he would have deemed himself meanly disloyal to any woman to fancy that he could win her before he had made the effort. And somewhat after this fashion his thoughts went to himself: "Ah, Margaret, Margaret, you are brilliant and fascinating, and all that, and I had



rather have you by my side this minute than any woman in the world, saving one only, — one with a soul bright and strong, like fire, tender and soft as dew; one whose very voice and presence seem to banish the devils of which I am possessed, — devils of sloth, vanity, selfishness. But, Margaret, under all the bloom and charm, what should I find if my soul went to you for cool springs, when it was hot and thirsty in the hard wrestle of life? I know my weaknesses, I and God, and that the devil is forever getting the better of what little good is in me. I want a woman who will help to make me a truer man, who will inspire and exalt me, who, knowing my weaknesses, will hold for me still her first love and faith; while daily, hourly contact with her nobleness, purity, sweetness, shall be the slow leaven to refine this big, sluggish lump of me.”

What would Margaret Wheatley, sitting by his side, with her young bloom and grace, have thought of all this? It would have sounded to her like the vagaries of a madman. She could have had no comprehension of, much less any sympathy with it. Yet you would have thought to see the two that this young man and maiden were having the merriest time imaginable. The light badinage flashed back and forth between themselves and the party in the two carriages behind, in which rode all of Duke's sisters, with some of the young gentlemen in their train.



## CHAPTER XIV.

BUT somebody in the stately chamber at the Walbridges was *not* having a very merry time, whatever might be the case with the party.

Jessamine conscientiously made ready her writing materials for Ross' letter. But something was the matter with the girl. There was no tumult, no thunderings nor lightnings, but chill and blackness, and creeping across all those soft words of Edith's about her brother and Margaret Wheatley. There was a pain, too, in her heart, — a live-dead ache. Trying to shake it off, the girl rose up and dragged her heavy limbs across the room. "Oh, dear!" she said, "I wish there was somebody in the world in whose lap I could lay down my head a little while; some mother or sister;" her mouth quivering like a grieved child's.

Jessamine did not know what ailed her. She only felt so utterly forlorn and lonely in the world. For the first time there came across her a longing to get away from the splendor which had surrounded her; and Hannah Bray's words returned to her: "I feel certain you will not come back to us as you went away, my child."



Her homely friend was right there. A new world lay between her and that morning when she went out from the old house, and turned to look at it for the last time, with a sudden yearning in her heart. Ah! it is only when we strain them suddenly, that we find how tough are the old fibres woven of memory and association.

With a sudden longing, too, Jessamine looked off to the new home which had been offered her. Was not God caring for her again? She had been afraid that she should live a useless life in his world. There might be some hidden corner in the great garden of the Lord for her to make a little fairer; at any rate, she would try.

She sat down now, and cried all alone, not passionately, but large, salt, bitter tears, whose hopelessness did not belong to her youth, or to any age, for that matter, but she could not cry away that dull, steady ache about her heart. Ross must be written to though, and the afternoon was wearing away, and the party of gay people would soon be back, and she must meet them with a face that would tell no story of this miserable afternoon.

She tried to put a light heart into her letter; but, despite herself, there was a heavy throb through it sometimes.

The new home which had opened its doors to her of a sudden formed the principal feature in Jessamine's letter. Ross' nature was a practical one, and she felt some uneasiness lest he should regard the whole matter as rather visionary and romantic. But men could not judge in such matters for women, as Mrs. Kent had said, and



Jessamine saw that she must take this affair into her own hands.

The letter was not finished until long after the gay party had returned.

When Jessamine went downstairs her face was steady enough, and she listened to rapturous accounts of the ride, and to regrets on every side that she did not go.

Duke, however, kept aloof from her. Indeed, there had come of late a slight constraint in his manner toward her. Always conscious of her presence, with his veins full of fire, and his heart throbbing like a fluttered maiden's, how could the young man maintain just the old, light composure of his bearing, when face to face with the lady of his love, and that awful secret within his soul?

Jessamine was conscious of this change too; but, if possible, Duke's watchfulness for her ease and happiness seemed to augment at this time; so she would not allow herself to see any difference in his manner. After dinner, that evening, some friends from New York called on Mrs. Ashburn and her niece, and Duke and Jessamine were left awhile almost alone in the library, — something which very seldom happened nowadays. The conversation seemed to flag between them. At last, he took up a volume from the table, and, running over the leaves, his eyes lighted on a passage which brought a sudden change over his face. A light shone in them, and a smile, half curious, half amused, played about his mouth.

He looked up at Jessamine, the smile making a



warmth about the coldness of her heart. "What book have you there?" she asked, suddenly.

"*'The Courtship of Miles Standish.'* Of course you have read it?"

"Oh, yes, with a wonderful delight. Priscilla on her milk-white steed, going through the forest, with John Alden walking by her side that autumn day, is a picture that one, having seen it through the poet's eyes, can never forget, — the homeliness, the truth, the tenderness, and the beauty."

"And in its pure, fresh, wholesome atmosphere, how all the splendor and magnificence of a fashionable bridal shows its tinsel and its gas-lights!" answered Duke.

"You were smiling at some passage in your reading just now. What was it pleased you?"

An impulse seized Duke at the moment, that left him no volition of his own. He handed the volume over to Jessamine, and pointed to the lines; but he did not tell her he was thinking of her, nor how well they suited his own case.

So she read the passage: —

"*'But of a thundering No, point blank from the mouth of a woman,  
That I confess I'm ashamed of, nor am I ashamed to confess it.'*"

"I don't think," said Jessamine, in her quiet, earnest way, as though the matter had not the slightest connection with herself, and just as she would have said it to Ross, "that any man would have much reason to be afraid of a woman who would 'thunder' a 'No!' in his



ear to such a question, asked honestly and loyally. At any rate such a 'No,' in the end, would be better than 'Yes.' "

Duke looked at the girl sitting there in her soft, quiet grace, sweet and womanly as the Puritan maiden they were talking about. Something leaped and shone wide and hungry in his eyes.

"Your 'No,' would never be thundered in any man's ears, Miss Jessamine. I can imagine what a low, soft, pitiful thing it would be; but for all that it might rumble through his soul for years afterward, the death-blow of all his hopes, dreams, aspirations — life itself — never clearing the air and making it sweeter."

Jessamine looked up in a swift surprise, her face all in a heat at those strange words and the stranger tone, and met the shining, hungry glance.

It confused — frightened her. How she would have answered, or whether at all, she never knew; for at that moment Eva darted into the library.

What more Duke would have said he never knew also; for he had been overmastered and hurried quite out of himself.

But the wind suddenly changed, and blew from the west in the soul of Jessamine Holland; and, instead of the dark, there was light, and gladness, and, the singing of birds. She did not stop to ask what had wrought the change; perhaps she was afraid to.

But the next hour was a very pleasant one for the three. Eva brought up the ride again, and was energetic in her regrets that Jessamine had remained at home



"I was selfish enough to hope that you would forget Ross for a few hours for the rest of us," said Duke.

"He really wanted her to go then," Jessamine thought, "despite his penchant for Margaret Wheatley. Duke would not speak in that way without he meant it."

"Meanwhile, Edith was relating to her mother the "little stroke of policy," as she called it, which had kept Miss Holland at home that afternoon, Mrs. Walbridge and Mrs. Ashburn having at the time been down town together.

"It was very cleverly managed, my dear," answered the lady, when her daughter concluded; "but I do not like to have a daughter of my own resort to manoeuvres of this sort. I always was opposed to intrigues."

"Oh, well, mamma, one can't always be squeamish; and I think the circumstances justified a little management on my part."

"I hope they did. So Duke and Margaret had their ride quite to themselves?"

"Yes; in the phaeton. I wish Duke had seized so propitious a chance to propose. I have no doubt as to the success of his suit. How I do wish that boy knew which side his bread was buttered!"

"I suspect the knowledge would not materially influence his conduct. But Margaret Wheatley is such a charming creature, I have been in hopes that your brother would fall in love with her."

Mrs. Walbridge would never "put it" in any other light, never admit to herself even that the girl's fortune



lay at the bottom of her eager desire that Margaret Wheatley should be her daughter-in-law.

“It shan’t be my fault if she isn’t,” answered Edith, with a toss of her head.

Mrs. Walbridge smiled, looking on her handsome eldest daughter. She had great faith in Edith’s diplomatic skill when she exerted it; but she said now, “Be careful, my child, not to do anything that you may regret afterward, even to bring to pass a thing which we all so ardently desire.”

This was a gentle admonition, which satisfied Mrs. Walbridge’s conscience, while it would not be likely to exert any strong influence upon her daughter’s proceedings.

Jessamine Holland carried a heart fluttering in happiness up to her room that night. The look that shone in Duke’s eyes made her cheeks hot and her pulses bound whenever she thought of it. What did it mean?

Jessamine asked herself that question, and then — I think she was afraid to answer it to herself — a singular tremulousness came over her; she drew her breath hard; and her eyes were like the stars with the new glory and joy and beauty which shone in them. And with the old childish prayer that night, she added another, that if her Father’s hand had opened the gates of the new home, the light and the wisdom might be given her to see clearly and walk wisely. And then she laid down and slept on it, as she had promised Mrs. Kent. The next morning her decision was embodied in the brief note which she sent to the lady: —



"MY DEAR FRIEND: *I will come and do, God helping me, the best I can.*

"*Sincerely yours,*

"JESSAMINE HOLLAND."

The little note made Mrs. Kent the happiest of women for that day. She was an impulsive little thing; and when Jessamine's letter reached her, she was sitting playing with her baby, who had just been brought in, fresh from his bath, in snowy cambric and laces; the small, fluttering hands, the sweet baby face, with its mother's wide, innocent eyes, the pink cheeks and the scarlet mouth, making a prettier sight than any of the pictures on the wall.

Richard Kent, sitting in his arm-chair in his flowered dressing-gown, was thinking just the same thing as he watched the young mother frolic with her baby on the rug, and hold a glittering rattle-box just above the child, who crowed, and laughed, and stretched his little, dimpled hands after the toy.

Richard Kent was a bluff, square-shouldered, well-featured man, with heavy figure, and shambling gait, and iron-gray hair; but it was all the same, so long as he looked handsomer than any living man in the eyes of the one little woman in the world for whom he really cared.

The toy dropped suddenly into the lap of the baby as his mother seized the note, which a servant had just brought in, and, tearing it open, Mrs. Kent gathered out the meaning. She was off her feet in an instant, dancing half across the room in her delight.

"O Dick, she's really coming!"



Mr. Kent thought his wife had the prettiest little airs and graces imaginable. Whatever she did was perfect in his eyes; and though the man had been brought to give his consent to this project of study, he had done it with just that sort of feeling with which one gratifies any pretty little whim of a child's, looking at the whole matter in that strong, commonplace daylight which had served him so well in the world, and in which he regarded everything not connected with his wife and baby.

"Let me see the letter, child," he said, thinking that, now the thing was really settled, this receiving an entire stranger on so intimate a footing in their household for a whole year might not be just the agreeable thing his wife fancied.

So with a good deal of empressement Mrs. Kent brought her husband the letter. He read it, scanning the hand, and the words closely, as he was in the habit of doing some new endorsement of a note.

"I like the looks of that," he said, at last. "Sensible young woman this; no flourishes nor affectations there; but fine, strong, and clear. Then there's no unnecessary words, no going about the thing; but brief, and to the point. I don't, however, quite like this idea of having somebody round all the time; a man wants to feel that his home is his own to do just what he has a mind to in it; and this Miss — what you call it —"

"Miss Holland, Dick; now do remember."

"This Miss Holland may sometimes be in the way."

"O Dick, if you should see her you'd never say that. She'll never intrude herself on us. I know you'll like



her; and I am so anxious to have her come at once, and make the first plunge into our studies."

"I don't see what you want to bother your pretty head about them things, child. As though you weren't wise enough and bright enough by nature. These foolish women have put this notion into your brain, when I'd match you against the whole of them for native wit and brightness."

"Ah, but, Dick, you dear old fellow, you've no idea how fearfully ignorant I am. I'm dreadfully ashamed of myself when I am thrown amongst people who have had a chance in the world. I hardly dare open my lips to say a word, lest I should let something wrong fall, and they will make sport of me."

"Let them do it if they dare," growled Richard Kent.

"Ah, but—I suppose a man cannot understand it; but real, well-bred ladies sometimes do these things, and it is very humiliating;" her voice shaking a little.

"Have they been troubling my little bird?" said the large, coarse man, with a voice as tender and pitiful as a woman's. "She was made for nothing in the world but to sing among the leaves in the sunshine, and they better let her alone. Nobody's going to vex my darling. I hold, through their husbands and fathers, more of these fine ladies in my power than you suspect, or they either."

Mrs. Kent rose up, and came to her husband, and ran her fingers through the thick, iron-gray hair. "Dick," she said, earnestly, "you are the best man in the whole



world. I do not believe there was ever another with such a big heart as yours, or ever will be another afterward. You took the little factory girl, with all her defects and ignorance, and set her in the midst of all your wealth and splendor, and there you keep her like a crowned queen, and will not see a fault in her. But she grows more conscious of them all the time, and one of these days, when I am no longer your little girl-wife, and our boy has grown above my head, I want to be something that he and his father may be proud of."

"No danger but what we shall be all that;" the shrewd eyes looking with fond tenderness on the pretty creature before him.

"Ah, yes; but not wholly because I am bright and pretty, or all those things you think me, but because I am a sensible, and thoughtful, cultured woman; that is what I want to be some of these days, for your sakes, my husband and my child."

Richard Kent began to discern there was some latent strength and energy which he had not suspected in the little factory girl he had taken to wife. He was amused, impressed, and the practical man was half convinced there was something in this reasoning, after all, and something more in his wife's plan than a pretty, romantic notion, which in the end would come to nothing; but then it was best to indulge her until she got tired of it.

So it was settled that they should ride over to the Walbridges, and prevail upon Jessamine to appoint the earliest day possible for her entrance into their family, although Richard Kent could not get over his notion that



she was a book-worm, and the man had a horror of such.

Meanwhile, Jessamine began to feel that it was high time she announced to the family her intention of going to the Kents. There was no need that the former should know anything beyond the fact that she accepted an invitation to visit the others. The whole matter was no affair of the Walbridges, and she shrank from the thought of their coolly discussing Mrs. Kent's secret. No doubt they would be surprised; but they would have no motive to object to the visit, even if they had any right to control her movements.

But Duke was not included in his family. He had been her friend, in no ordinary way; he had pledged himself to stand in Ross' stead to the lonely orphan sister; and she felt that she owed him some explanation of the circumstances which had determined her acceptance of Mrs. Kent's invitation. Since Margaret Wheatley's advent, Jessamine had fewer opportunities than formerly of any private talk with her young host. But one occurred one evening, two or three days after her decision had been formed, when Duke returned early in the afternoon and found Jessamine alone in the library with some book, whose attraction had proved strong enough to keep her from accompanying the other ladies down town.

Seizing her chance, when he came and sat down by the table near herself, Jessamine related the whole story of her acquaintance with Mrs. Kent, adding only, "It is her secret and mine. Everybody else will suppose, at



the first, at least, that I go there as her guest; for, though I could have no possible objection to the world's knowing my relations in the household, the lady herself does not want cold and cynical people laughing over her first attempts at geography and arithmetic; though, after all, if I were in her place, I should hardly care what people might say of me."

"That is right, Miss Jessamine. We only learn how to live when we possess our soul in some serene climate where the buzz and tumult of what people may say can never reach us. Yet, I can understand Mrs. Kent's feelings, and her secret will of course be sacred."

"I am a little uneasy as to what Ross may think of it all," she went on to say. "I wish you would do me the favor to write him that you, knowing all the circumstances, approve of what I have done."

A curious smile came over his face. He looked at the girl. "I have not said that, Miss Jessamine."

"Ah, but you would if you knew all. It will be so much better than going back to the old, lonely life at Hannah Bray's. Then, too, I shall be doing some little work in the world, and that will give me strength and courage."

"I never thought of your going back to Hannah Bray's, Miss Jessamine. Such a thing is not to be so much as named. But I had expected that you would remain with us until Ross returned. You seem to have grown quite into one of the family. I do not see how we are to get on without you."



She looked up with her bright, grateful smile. "I have grown uneasy of late over the length of my visit. I should have returned home in a week or two, if—if nothing better had opened."

Duke rose up and paced the room. It seemed to him that all the light and life of his elegant home would go out when this quiet little girl went over his threshold. He stopped suddenly; he bent over her.

"Jessamine," he said, in a low voice, but it seemed to the girl that it had the strength and rumble of distant thunder, "I wish you would not go away from us."

"O Duke, it is best—I could not be happy—staying any longer," she faltered, hardly knowing in her confusion whether the words answered his speech or not.

"Not happy with us! O Jessamine, your words hurt me cruelly!"

She looked up quickly now; a tender shining filled the wide gray darkness of his eyes. He laid his hand on her shoulder, and she felt the strong youth's tremor through every fine pulse of her being.

Just then there was a hurrying of feet in the hall below. The people had returned home. There would be a burst into the library with the next moment. With a strong instinct to escape, Jessamine hurried out of a side door and up to her own room. Her face hot, her pulses quivering, she burst into a passion of tears. Yet it was such delicious weeping that she would have been glad had it lasted forever. There was a great tremulous



light and happiness at her heart, and, like the ringing of bells, filling with musical chimes some May morning, all dew, and perfume, and shining, rang the tones rather than the words of Duke Walbridge in her ear.

Yet, with maidenly shrinking, she tried to shut her eyes to the feeling which lay far down in the limpid words and tones, and gave them their real worth and meaning, — getting up and bathing her hot cheeks and trembling fingers, and chiding herself for being such a little fool as to be so happy.

Jessamine's announcement that she was to visit the Kents created a fresh sensation in the Walbridge family. To some members of it, no doubt, this appeared a most agreeable way of getting rid of a guest whose presence might frustrate their dearly cherished plans.

Still the regrets were manifold and polite, and on the part of Eva and her next elder sister, Kate, were, no doubt, sincere; but Gertrude entered too warmly into her mother's and elder sister's plans not to sympathize with their feeling regarding Jessamine's further stay among them.

Mr. and Mrs. Kent came around to expedite Jessamine's removal with all the arguments and entreaties in their power, and the former had a golden pass-key to the Walbridges, which it seemed the grim stone warders on each side of the front door instinctively comprehended and honored.

So there was a great deal of complimentary talk about the Kents making a sudden raid, and stealing their guest



away, and their reluctance to letting her go, on the part of the Walbridges; but for all that Mrs. Kent maintained and carried her point, which was, that Jessamine should join them with small delay.

“Anyhow, it won’t be as though you were going off home. We can come to see you every day or two, can’t we, Duke?” said Eva, hovering between her guest and her brother, and addressing both after the Kents had left.

Duke had not been present during their call, but his sister had related its result to him.

Margaret Wheatley, who stood near, answered for him:—

“Yes, if you will persist in running away from us, Miss Holland, we will take our revenge by running after you; so you will not easily get rid of us.”

The young heiress was, after all, not quite certain whether she was sorry, or not, that Jessamine Holland was going away. She liked the girl, to use her own term, immensely. There was something fresh, piquant, original, about all which Jessamine said and did, which had a fine flavor to the tastes of the city girl, tired and sated with the commonplace, fashionable type.

Still, in a subtle way, Mrs. Ashburn’s and the Walbridges’ influence had been at work with Margaret Wheatley. She had begun to think that it would be very nice to have Duke fall in love with her; that it was somehow quite his duty to do it, and that Jessamine Holland might possibly stand in the way of such an agreeable consummation of affairs.



"I never could, of course, fall in love *first*," languidly mused the young heiress; "but I do believe I like Duke Walbridge better than any other man I ever saw. He's odd, and moody, and incomprehensible; but all that only makes him more interesting."

"Mamma," said Gertrude, "it's the oddest thing that the Kents should take such a violent fancy to Miss Holland. What do you suppose it means?"

"The solemn riddle is plain enough to me," answered Edith. "It all comes of Miss Holland's setting Mrs. Kent right, when the lady made that ridiculous blunder at the lunch-party over Dante, the ancient Greek author. I wouldn't at all wonder if the two had entered into some nice little compact, whereby Mrs. Kent should be inducted into the first rudiments of the English language, with Miss Holland for professor. At all events, it is a very comfortable way of getting rid of the young lady at just this crisis. I am heartily obliged to Mrs. Kent."

"Edith, I do not quite like to hear you talk so. There are some thoughts one had better keep to themselves," admonished her mother.

"I wonder if it is any worse to have the thoughts than to tell them, mamma," laughed the young lady.

There was no doubt that Edith Walbridge was shrewd and brilliant, and that her talent for intrigue once aroused, it would be difficult to circumvent her.

"There, Dick, didn't I tell you you'd like her?" said Mrs. Kent, nestling up to her husband, as they drove home. "I am so delighted that she is coming to us so



soon, though I don't wonder those people are reluctant to let her go."

"Nonsense," answered the shrewd, practical man. "A great deal of that talk was on the surface. I could see down deep enough into it, to find the hollowness under all the fine words. I miss my guess if some of them don't feel glad to let her take another berth. There's a young man in the family—seen him in the father's office, shrewd, good-hearted fellow—real stuff about him. I shouldn't wonder now, if some of the family had an eye out for him. Well, thank the Lord, my little wild-flower is not a fine lady."

So the changes rung.



## CHAPTER XV.

SIX months have come and gone since Jessamine Holland first entered the household of the Kents. These months have formed on the whole the smoothest, happiest half year of her life. It is the spring-time of her youth, the bloom, the dew, the sunshine of the late May, for it is four autumns since Ross left her, and the gate of her teens closed softly some time ago, and Jessamine is near to her twenty-second birthday.

Yet to most young girls the change from the Walbridges to the Kents would have presented some contrasts hardly agreeable. There was much less social excitement in the latter home, and whereas Jessamine had had her mornings for calls abroad or receptions at home, interfused with all those pleasant stimulants of talk and merriment which enter far into the life of fashionable ladies, she now had one unvarying routine of teaching, not of that sort either which would have inspired and fed her own faculties, but the primary rules and first principles, and, if the facts must be admitted, they often proved slow drudgery to both teacher and pupil.

The mornings were religiously devoted to study. "If it is worth doing at all, it is worth doing well," said Jes-



samine. "We will give to it the best of the day, and earn our ease and pleasure afterward." So all company, all recreation, had to bend to this rule, but for all that it was hard work to the young souls who brought to it whatever mental or moral forces were in them. Jessamine had daily reason for thankfulness that she had gone over the ground step by step, with "little help ; that in her studies she had been a law to herself." She knew all the lions in the path, and learned also, what was most important for her, that riches and prosperity are often a greater hindrance to study and discipline than poverty and hardship.

As for Mrs. Kent, the patience and courage of the poor little woman failed her often. She had no idea that study was such tiresome work as she found it, and if the truth must be owned, she broke down a good many times, and cried like a school-girl over the conjugation of a verb, or an example in long division. There were times when she would have been heartily glad of some excuse which would have justified her to herself in giving up the whole thing, but her pride, and, better than that, some sense of duty, kept her from yielding to the inclination.

If she had had any other teacher in the world than Jessamine Holland, Mrs. Kent would never have persisted in her purpose ; but the former learned that, added to her duties of instructress, she had to soothe, to encourage, to inspire her pupil, and it required sometimes a large stock of patience to accomplish all this. The discipline would do Jessamine no harm in the end ; on the



contrary, real service; but for all that it was trying sometimes when Mrs. Kent broke down in nervousness and tears.

It was not to be wondered at. We all have to pay a terrible price for intellectual improvidence in our youth, whether the fault be ours or others, and the motive which had inspired Mrs. Kent's purpose of self-culture was one that certainly did her great honor; but purpose and achievement are two different things, and the daily drudgery of any grand work is never heroic. Just look about among the people whom you know, and see how many women there are whom you honestly believe would be equal to this work, which Mrs. Kent had set herself to do!

But there was another side to this study, and the friendship between these two young women, so singularly brought together, took deep root in their natures. Neither had ever known the worth and the happiness of a true friendship, and, without that experience, either as a blessed reality or a tender memory, any woman's life is barren of something which neither matrimony nor maternity can supply.

Each of the friends had much to give the other, and every day each also seemed to grow fonder of the other. In fact, Richard Kent used often to declare, in his good-natured, humorous way, that he was getting jealous of his wife's regard for Miss Holland; it was putting his "nose so terribly out of joint."

The man was just as ready to indulge his wife's "notion for study" as he would have been her liking for a



new set of jewelry, and classed them both in the same category, as a pretty little feminine freak.

All the drudgery was wisely hidden from his eyes by both pupil and teacher, for if he had known all the sore perplexities which his wife underwent in carrying out her purpose, the man would not have been so complacent over it; he would have said, very decidedly, "Throw books to the dogs. You're smart enough for me, child, and that is all that's necessary." Not that Mrs. Kent would have regarded any such dictum as unalterable, for her husband was no petty domestic tyrant, and in one way or another she would have been sure to carry her point.

But it was better that the worries and anxieties should be kept between the friends; and this was not difficult when the master of the house was absent every morning during study hours, and found bright young faces ready to greet him at dinner.

Jessamine Holland was an element of life, force, and refinement in the household, which, in many ways, was just what it needed. Its master was quite contented that she should be there, and, indeed, liked her better than any woman he had ever seen, except his wife; for Richard Kent, after his life of tumbling about the world, had not the highest opinion of women in general, and regarded them as usually a compound of nerves, whims, and affectations.

Such an opinion never makes a man better or nobler; it is always a misfortune to him to hold it; still the belief did Richard Kent as little mischief as it could any



man. His wife, at least, had the benefit of his opinion, in that he regarded all her virtues and sweetness as altogether exceptional; and this made the man, if possible, a little more self-complacent than ever over his own choice.

Jessamine Holland liked to talk with her host, for she had, with her bright intelligence and quick sympathies, a remarkable power of getting at the best side of everybody. She liked, too, to look at the world through the eyes of this man. It was not at all like talking with Duke Walbridge. Richard Kent had none of the fine nature of her brother or her friend, and his coarseness sometimes shocked the young girl, who, bred in poverty, had always been accustomed to inbred refinement of speech and manner; but, for all that, though Jessamine missed something from the Walbridge household, which people of social culture possess, though brain and heart are shallow, yet, on the whole, the freedom and the independence of her present home had its advantages. She could be certain that here she was giving quite as much as she received, and she had never any uncomfortable consciousness that she was the subject of a half-patronizing criticism, and Jessamine did not know how heavily this feeling had weighed upon her until she was quite free from it. Her brother's deed could not wholly cancel the debt which she owed to the Walbridges' hospitality, nor a dread at the last lest this might become a little irksome. She missed Duke's society more than she would own to herself, but then she had been looking Hannah Bray's in the face; and as for Eva, though she



must always love the child dearly, still, in a different way, Mrs. Kent made up for that loss.

Sometimes Jessamine Holland's memory caught up suddenly the look that blazed in Duke's eyes, and the tones of his voice that afternoon in the library; but her heart always grew loud and her cheeks hot when she remembered that time. She dared not think upon it; she put it away, with a frightened consciousness that there was a great, unfathomable ocean in her own soul into which she dared not gaze; a mighty passion of love, self-forgetfulness, devotion, of which every true woman has at some time of her life some awful prescience. But, with all her courage, Jessamine Holland shrank terrified from that side of herself, — would not let it stir into life and consciousness.

There was another moment of which she could never think, though its memory came up sometimes and clutched at her soul, and choked her breath; it was the moment when she came to say "Good-by" to Duke Walbridge. She had parted with all the rest of his family cordially and easily enough; when it came to Eva, it is true, there was a keen regret; but as Duke accompanied her to Mr. Kent's carriage, and said, "You will allow me to ride over with you, Miss Jessamine?" a sudden terror of grief overpowered the girl.

"No; not to-night," her answer struggled out. "Thank you; but — but, there is a reason; do not be offended."

Duke fancied, in a vague way, she was sorry at leaving them all, and was too much absorbed with his own



pain at that moment to give much heed to Jessamine's manner; he only closed the door, and said "Good-by," as a prisoner might have said it, going back from the warm light of some beloved face into the cold, dark gloom of his cell; and it was the truth, that his elegant home, with the stone lions in front, looked very much like a prison when he turned back toward it, listening to the sound of the wheels that were bearing away the warmth and life of his life; and yet Jessamine Holland was only going away three miles, and he could see her every few days.

The rest of the household, including Mrs. Ashburn and her niece, stood on the steps to witness Jessamine's departure. The Walbridges had been polite to the last; indeed, they had made renewed attempts at cordiality as the time drew near for Jessamine to leave them.

Still, notwithstanding all the parting regrets, there was a long breath of relief drawn by more than one of the company assembled on the steps when Jessamine Holland rolled away with Mr. and Mrs. Kent. It would certainly have been a much more satisfactory finale if the visit had concluded with a grand display of bridal ceremonies and graces, and these wound up with charming blushes and tears, and impressive partings, and an attractive honeymoon programme.

That this was not the case was not her fault, Mrs. Walbridge philosophically reflected. She certainly had wished the young girl every good in life, and was more than ready to use all her influence to promote Miss Holland's welfare; but as a mother, to whose heart the hap-



piness of her only son was dearer than her own, she could not help feeling a sense of relief that there was now no other element in the household to neutralize the effect of Margaret Wheatley's society on the young man. So Mrs. Walbridge put the whole matter to her own soul, and it gave her a very pleasant feeling of self-justification.

Under one pretence and another, therefore, the ladies' visit was prolonged by the Walbridges, and Duke, his soul restless, lonely, hungry, was fain to turn to Margaret for the amusement which her sparkling talk always afforded him, and the young heiress found Duke Walbridge, as she confided to her aunt, more agreeable than any of her New York admirers. He was peculiar and obstinate, — one was never quite certain of this Duke Walbridge, — but that only made him the more attractive after all.

There was a straight path open to the money-bags of the rich banker, if Duke would only turn into it. "What a fool he will be to let such good luck slip!" said Edith, with angry impatience, to her mother; and Mrs. Walbridge's soul echoed back the words, if her lips did not, — "What a fool!"

Meanwhile there was no lack of visiting at the Kents. Duke went over oftener than his mother wished; still Eva or some other of his sisters frequently accompanied him. Sometimes, too, Margaret Wheatley rode over with the young man, and she was even gracious enough to say to Duke that she could never forgive Mrs. Kent for taking that charming Miss Holland away from them.



The young lady's visit was, however, cut short, greatly to everybody's vexation, by the sudden illness of her father, which compelled her immediate return home with her aunt.

The Walbridges, however, secured their arrangements for the summer, and had laid out a most attractive programme of watering places and mountain trips. It all came to pass as they anticipated. Everybody had a delightful season, fluttering about from one fashionable haunt to another; but when the autumn came, the old friendly relations hardly seemed changed betwixt Duke Walbridge and Margaret Wheatley.

O money-bags of the banker! And there were so many sons-in-law at hand for you, and here was one who might have the gold for the asking!

So, as I said, the six months have come and gone, and Jessamine Holland sits in the pleasant autumn afternoon, in the library, with Mrs. Kent. Any watchful observer would detect the change which these six months have wrought in the young matron. It penetrates even the tones of her voice; it has imparted a new maturity and refinement to the young, bright face. She has made up her mind a great many times during the last half year that she is only a very stupid little fool, and that there is no use of her trying to make anything of herself.

In some of her despondent moods she would have been very glad to have Jessamine Holland think the same, though in her clearer and higher ones she has an inexpressible joy in the consciousness that she has not ignobly broken down, as she knows must have been the case over



and over again, had it not been for the patience and persistence of her young teacher.

The windows were open, and soft winds slid through them; you could hear the hum of the brook through the golden stillness. The earth lay in that trance of beauty which possesses her in the late September. Into those soft west winds it did not seem that a chill could ever wander, or that vision of blue sky ever be marred by a cloud.

There was no use trying to read. Jessamine laid down her book and walked to the window, and looked out. Mrs. Kent, a little way off, frolicked with the bit of pink and white flesh on the floor.

Suddenly she looked up. "What are you thinking about, Miss Jessamine?" she asked.

"Of what God said over his world when he first made it, that it was good. It is a world to fall in love with to-day, and though in a little while I know it will grow cold and bare and withered, still, through the storms and the snows that are coming I shall carry a vision of the beauty and splendor of this hour; and they will abide with me."

"Aunt Dess, Aunt Dess, see here!" and the boy tottered toward her, holding up a knight in armor on horseback, which his father had brought him home that day, — a pretty, fragile, painted toy.

Jessamine had a passionate fondness for children. She caught up the little fellow in her arms, and smothered the sweet, dewy face with her kisses, and the young mother looked on with her smiling eyes. "You are a tuberose,



you are a violet, you are a lily ; you are just the concentrated sweetness and beauty of all flowers," went on Jessamine to the boy.

"You are an exacting little tyrant," laughed the mother. "You make all the household bend to your tempers and whims. There's your father now, — you just lead him around by the nose and make a bound slave of him, only he does not see the chains. He thinks he can't come home to dinner without bringing you a toy, until the house is strewn with the wrecks of your play-things. Ah ! my boy, your mother's play-house consisted of a rag-baby and a little pewter tea-set, and half-a-dozen clam-shells. It is an awful contrast."

Mrs. Kent had a half-pathetic, half-comical way of putting the contrasts betwixt her old life and her present one, which often amused and touched Jessamine.

The two young women had, in their long, close, home intimacy, confided their histories to each other, — both pitiful enough, though in different ways.

A little gravity slid into Mrs. Kent's face.

"Ah ! Miss Jessamine," she said, after a moment's silence, "it seems very strange, very hard, the way things happen in this world. To think that half the money which is thrown away on my baby's play-house would have given me the education for which I am having such a hard struggle now !"

"And then I should have had no pupil," said Jessamine, running her fingers through the golden, glancing heap of curls in her lap. "That sounds anything but generous, doesn't it ? Still I think it must always be



a comfort to find how our own losses are somebody's good."

"And I should not have had my friend," answered Mrs. Kent, and her eyes shone tenderly on Jessamine.

"Ah, my dear, what a fortunate thing that blunder of mine was, about Dante! I see very well how absurd it was, and I have got over the soreness enough to be able to laugh at my own ignorance. It was, as I said, the most fortunate blunder I ever made, and I really shall congratulate myself over it as long as I live."

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Kent! I am sure I have the greater cause to be grateful to you for your false chronology."

"How happy we have been together!" continued the young wife. "Dick was saying to me this morning that he had grown pretty much of my mind about staying at home this summer, instead of taking a trip somewhere to the sea or the mountains. He doesn't suspect that the studies were the anchor that held us fast during all these pleasant days; but I am sure it was best. I am glad now that we did not go."

"Oh, I am rejoiced to hear you say that! You don't know how good it sounds to me," exclaimed Jessamine with great fervor, and the tears came into her eyes.

Mrs. Kent looked a little surprised.

"I can tell you now that it was an awful struggle to give up that trip, when you proposed it to me, and left the decision in my hands."

"Was it? How strange I had no suspicion of that from your manner!"



“How could it be otherwise, Mrs. Kent? You know I am young, and have been shut away all my life from the world, and I was hungry and thirsty to see something of it; but I saw, too, that to break in upon your studies this summer would be a fatal mischief. You were just then, as Ross would say, in the strain and tug; if you let go, all would be lost. I was your friend, and I said to myself, ‘Jessamine, Jessamine, it is not her pleasure or yours that you are to consider, but what is for your friend’s best good.’ I knew where that was; but for all it was very hard to sacrifice the journey, for it was the first summer of my life which ever offered me a great pleasure, and it cost me more than one sharp struggle to put it aside.”

“It was heroic,” replied Mrs. Kent, gazing at her friend with eyes in whose fondness some sudden moisture grew. “How in the world, at your age, could you do this!”

“I think,” answered Jessamine, slowly and gravely, “that early troubles make one old. I do not mean in heart or feeling necessarily, but in whatever requires wisdom and self-control.”

“I can’t perceive that my troubles ever had that effect on me,” replied Mrs. Kent, with one of her little quizzical smiles. “But I see now it would have been just as you say if I had given up the studies at that point and gone away. I never should have taken them up again. Now they begin to grow easier and more interesting. Then they were utterly hateful.”

“It was worth the summer to get around that sharp



corner. You know that I have already told you that, Mrs. Kent."

"Yes; though I doubted it at the time, it seemed such miserable, dragging work. I think you are always right, Miss Jessamine. How much good you have done me!"

Mrs. Kent spoke the truth. Even her husband marked the change in his young wife, and found some improvement in what he had before fancied perfect. It was not alone the lessons which Mrs. Kent received from Jessamine Holland which shaped her life to finer issues, though their discipline was invaluable. It was the daily association with a refined and high-toned nature. Mrs. Kent was observant, bright, assimilative. She soon acquired new habits of speaking, and, deeper than that, of thinking and feeling. Nature had done well by the little factory girl in the beginning, but, bright and susceptible herself, her heart and moral instincts had been trained as little as her manners, and although a natural grace pervaded the latter, as a bright kindness did the former, still both needed culture and higher examples.

Jessamine unconsciously stimulated her friend's whole nature by this daily thought and intimacy, as she never could have done except through their mutual affection. She was not half conscious of the work she was doing, and did not discern the change in her friend from day to day; but a stranger who had not met Mrs. Kent for six months would at once have detected it.

Jessamine's gaze went out of the window again. Among green leaves and purpling of grape-vines, among masses of bloom that heaped the ground with gorgeous



color, was that slow slipping of the soft west winds, and the distant hymn of the brooks, soft and sweet as the shaking of silver bells among the mountains of Switzerland.

Mrs. Kent's gaze followed her friend. "I think, Miss Jessamine, what you were saying about the year applies to human faces too, — the faces that we love, no matter how old, and wrinkled, and changed they grow, the vision of their youth and loveliness will cling to us always."

Even this remark showed the influence of her friend, the new heights to which Mrs. Kent had attained. It was not only in finer expressions, but it was in the new power, life, thought, which pervaded all her speech.

When her youth was gone, Richard Kent would not find, as so many husbands do, that everything else was gone with the pretty bloom, with the airs and graces, and that there only remained to him an empty-minded, querulous, selfish woman.

Jessamine turned quickly, her cheeks in a glow. "Oh, I am sure it must be so with all faces that we love," she said. "There is Ross; if his hair were one mass of snow, and his face another of wrinkles, it would never be old to me; it would wear the fresh boyhood, the manly youth, that is forever in my heart."

"And if this is true of your brother, it must be still more so of that other closer, tenderer love that is coming to you one of these days, Miss Jessamine," said Mrs. Kent, very gravely; but there was a little mischievous twinkle of a smile around her mouth.



Jessamine turned and looked out of the window. One watching could scarcely have told whether the soft bloom deepened in her cheeks.

The two women talked of love sometimes ; but Jessamine usually concluded with, "I do not think I shall ever love anybody so well as Ross. He is my knight, pure, and noble, and true as any who rode out in search of the Sangreal, or sat at King Arthur's Round Table, while his heart throbbed high over those old tales of heroism and chivalrous daring that stir our souls now like the sound of trumpets." She said something of that sort now.

"Oh, but that other must come ; he shall," Mrs. Kent replied, energetically ; and then Duke Walbridge rose up before her. Were those frequent visits of his to Jessamine Holland simply the courtesies which a generous nature owed to the sister of the preserver of his life ?

Jessamine talked of the young man often, and told Mrs. Kent that he had taken the place of Ross during his absence, and was a brother to her. Was that name a pretty fiction simply ?

Mrs. Kent, with her quick woman instincts, had caught something in the young man's eyes when they went suddenly in search of her friend. Still she wisely kept all that to herself ; and she was certain, had Jessamine Holland once admitted to herself that Duke Walbridge was the one love elected by her heart against her will, she might be silent, giving no sign until she went down to her grave ; but she would not disguise the fact with a falsehood.



Mrs. Kent only did her friend justice here. Jessamine had not admitted to her own heart more than her lips avowed.

"We have been very happy together, you and I, this summer," said Mrs. Kent, coming over to the window where Jessamine stood. "It doesn't cost me a pang now to think we relinquished the watering-places."

"Nor me either." Jessamine turned quickly around, with the clear sweetness of a smile which you instinctively felt would never play man or woman false.

Just then the phaeton drove up the avenue, and Mr. Kent, who sat inside, lifted his hat to the ladies.

"Come — ready for your drive!" he shouted.

"We will be, in five minutes," answered his wife, from the window.



## CHAPTER XVI.

THE day succeeding this talk betwixt Jessamine Holland and Mrs. Kent, the Walbridges reached their home in New York, the feminine portion of the household a good deal worn out with a summer full of excitement and gayety.

“After all, it is pleasant to be at home once more,” each one ejaculated, as all filed into the old rooms, and settled themselves in the old places.

In the evening, too, the family gathered together in its best mood to talk over the events of the season, the pleasures and the triumphs. On the whole, it had been a very satisfactory summer to Mrs. Walbridge; the beauty of her daughters had created a profound sensation wherever they had alighted; and they had been constantly beset with attentions of that flattering kind which could not fail to gratify the heart of an ambitious mother.

Still, for all that, the great object of the season had not been achieved. Mrs. Walbridge could not tell, for her life, whether the relations of her son and Margaret Wheatley were not precisely the same now that they had been during the previous spring. It was very tantalizing. To think of that young man's throwing away such a golden



opportunity ! He had been Margaret's constant cavalier during the season, and there was no doubt that she preferred him to any of the host of beaux that were always fluttering about her, while Mrs. Ashburn looked on Duke, smiling and propitious.

Still, when the families separated in New York, Mrs. Walbridge had no reason to suppose that the basis of a most cordial friendship, laid in old memories and associations, had been altered. Of course matters could not go on so always. Some mother's fortunate son might step in and secure the hand of Margaret Wheatley and her father's money-bags before another winter had passed.

Duke's mother had hitherto refrained from any hint of her wishes, and Edith had managed affairs most skilfully ; but the former had begun to feel that something might be gained now by sounding Duke ; at any rate, if silence had achieved nothing, not much harm could be done by speaking.

"Here we are all at home, and not one of us engaged !" said Gertrude, in her lively way. "It's really too bad, mamma, that you should bring us all back just as we went. I'm sure it isn't my fault."

She tried to look very innocent and demure ; she certainly succeeded in looking very pretty while she said this ; but for all that it was quite manifest that Gertrude was perfectly conscious that she was not uttering a word of the truth, and that the fault of her not being engaged was entirely her own.

Mrs. Walbridge laughed. "I suppose I ought to be classed with the unlucky mammas," she said, "to find



you all back on my hands at the end of the season. I think it was your place, Duke, to set an example to your sisters."

"My sisters are great humbugs and awful bothers," answered Duke, playfully. "I've had to dance attendance on them through a whole summer's campaign of fashions and frivolities, not one particle to my taste, when I would have vastly preferred being shut up stairs in my den with my books —"

"O you old bear!" said Eva, hanging about her brother.

"Wait until I get through, child. But, for all that, I think I like my sisters better than any young women I've seen since I left home."

There was a general laugh, in the midst of which Mrs. Walbridge and her eldest daughter exchanged glances, and each knew what was in the thought of the other; a wonder whether, had Jessamine Holland been of their party, Duke would have spoken just these words.

"I should be very glad to hear you compliment us so highly, Duke," replied Edith, "had not Margaret Wheatley been one of our party."

"Oh, yes!" answered Eva, jumping to the point, with the thoughtless eagerness of a girl. "It would be delightful to have Margaret Wheatley for a sister-in-law. I never thought of it before, but I really do wish, Duke, that you and she would fall in love with one another. How nice it would be!"

It was out now, for good or for evil. Mrs. Walbridge saw her time had come, and the lady's voice was never



keyed to a more steadied softness than when she added, "Yes, my dear, there is only one young woman in the world whom I could cordially welcome to my heart as my daughter-in-law, and her name is Margaret Wheatley."

"I'm sure all Duke's sisters feel precisely as you do, mamma," added Edith.

"There, now, Duke, it is every man's duty to marry to please his family," continued Gertrude, who enjoyed having her tongue unloosed at last. "You and Margaret will certainly have to marry each other."

"You are glib enough over a man's duties to his family," answered Duke, trying to parry the attack with a joke. "But what is a woman's under the same circumstances?"

More than one voice was ready with, "Precisely the same."

Edith was particularly submissive at that time. "I am sure," she said, in a tone so meek that one might never have suspected how seldom she failed of carrying her own point, "I should never think of marrying a man whom my family did not approve."

"I devoutly hope none of my children will ever do that. I think it would break my heart," rejoined Mrs. Walbridge.

"Duke," said Eva, still playfully, "you see it must be Margaret Wheatley and none other."

Duke looked around on the circle of women, his glance going from one face to the other. Then he shook his head slowly.

"If Margaret Wheatley would have me," he said, "I



do not think it would be well for her, well for me either."

"Why not?" asked more than one voice.

Again his look went, doubtful and grave, around the circle. "I don't think you would understand if I should tell you," he said.

"What more could a man ask?" said Edith, with great energy. "Margaret Wheatley has youth, beauty, grace, such as do not often fall to the lot of woman, and her character is as lovely as she is beautiful."

"Edith is right, Duke," replied his mother. "Margaret is all that, and my long friendship for the family makes me regard her almost as one of my own children. I have hoped, if you ever made up your mind to marry at all, and I suppose you will some day, your choice will fall where mine does."

"And then, Margaret is so rich," continued Eva. "Why, she would bring you her weight in gold!"

None of the others would have mentioned this fact to Duke, in enumerating Margaret Wheatley's attractions. With none of them, however, would it in reality weigh so lightly. But Eva was fond of Margaret, and thought it would be a delightful thing to have her for a sister-in-law, and so threw the money argument into the scale as one additional make-weight.

"All that you say is true," answered Duke, with his gravest face, "and yet, and yet —"

"Well, what is it?" asked Edith, impatiently.

"Mother — girls, I should be very glad to gratify you in my choice of a wife, but I should wrong myself, and



another equally, by making your choice the chiefest consideration."

This was so true that nobody could gainsay it.

After a moment's silence, his mother asked, "But, Duke, that is not meeting the question. What is in the way of your and Margaret's being happy together?"

The talk which commenced in playfulness, at least on the surface, had grown serious enough now.

"Because, mother, Margaret is not the right sort of woman for me. I grant she is all that you say in beauty and charms; but that is not everything."

Then that inward courtesy and reverence for womanhood, which makes the real knighthood of every true man, flashed up suddenly in Duke Walbridge's angry color and gesture.

"I think it's contemptible for any fellow to sit down and say what a woman could not be to him, whom he has never asked to have him, and who, very likely, might refuse him if he did; but you've compelled me into this sort of talk against my will."

"Well, we're ready to take the responsibility," replied Edith, thoroughly provoked with her brother, and yet a little touched, in spite of herself, at this instance of his delicate chivalry for her sex. "Do tell us, for once, Duke Walbridge, what kind of a woman would suit you?"

Then for the first time Duke told them, and they all listened breathlessly.

"It is hard to speak of such a thing," he said, half timidly, half to himself; "but I will try. She must be a woman who can think and feel with me, — a woman



who by original, immortal sympathies can enter into sorrow and grief, into the needs and limitations of other souls wherever she finds them, — one who feels her kindred with all humanity. A woman, too, with swift enthusiasms for whatever is good or true in the thought or deed of all ages and all men, — a woman with a mind alert, absorbent, comprehensive. Mind, now, I am not meaning a genius or a great woman, as the world goes, but a woman who would idealize life and all its duties and relations, who could not disappoint or disenchant me, — a woman believing in God and in man, and whose faith is dearer to her than life or death, — a woman who, when the test came, would always be steadfast through all obloquy and all sacrifices of what her sex would most prize, — a woman, too, full of sweet household ways, and bright fancies, overflowing often with mirth and humor. I think I should like her best, subject to little surprises of moods, grave in the midst of her sparkles, with playfulness glancing out suddenly from her most thoughtful moments. Such a woman would be a gift of God, a perpetual inspiration to my heart and soul and life, making a man of me, who feel sometimes in utter self-contempt that I am less than one now."

It was seldom that Duke Walbridge laid bare so much of his soul to his family. Only in exceptional moments like the present did some strong wave of his inmost being outflow in words like these.

Edith was the first one who spoke. "Duke, you are a goose. Do you suppose such a woman as you have been drawing ever lived, or that you will ever find such a



one? I should imagine the whole thing some fancy of a love-sick sophomore, strip it of all that fine talk."

"My son," said his mother, very kindly, "I know what women are. You have been painting a beautiful myth."

"Then I have no right to marry another. I should do a deadly wrong to myself, to my wife also, because she would not be the woman of my heart's election. She might make another man very happy; he might greatly prefer her to such a one as I have tried to show you; but every man must choose after his own kind. I do not quarrel with his choice; but, for myself, all that is best in me would go to rust and ruin if I were wedded to a woman who could not thrill responsive to my higher moments, and inspire them too. Here I *must* have recognition, sympathy, help from my wife. My whole nature craves it, and I cannot do it violence."

"I don't see why Margaret Wheatley couldn't be this to you as well as any other woman. I'm sure she's brilliant, and very kind-hearted, and all that," ventured Gertrude.

"Ah, but she isn't what I mean. You compel me to say it again. The day that I married Margaret Wheatley would be the ruin of me. Don't all of you stare at me as though I were a brute. I'm not good enough to be her husband. It's hard enough for me to resist the devil in all the shapes of ease, indolence, luxury, dissipation, in which he daily comes to me. How could I do it married to a woman whose wealth would pamper and suffocate me with splendid luxury? I am not low enough



to sit down in slavish enjoyment of my golden chains. I could never weld them into a ladder on which to climb heavenward. Then, in any wide sense, Margaret and I must always be strangers to each other. I have felt that in our most intimate moments. I enjoy her brightness, the sparkle of her talk and manner. She amuses and interests me; but when I have said that I have done. She never knew the thrill of one noble, self-forgetful emotion; all the awful griefs and struggles and sacrifices which any true soul, standing still to listen, hears echoing down through the dead years, are no more to her than the babbling of summer waves on the beach.

“Margaret is brilliant and charming, — none is more willing to grant it than I, — but her heart never throbbed with one grateful emotion to the dead men and women whose lives and whose deaths have wrought the liberty and peace and happiness she enjoys to-day; she never sympathized with any strong impulse for the help and elevation of her race. It was not in her from the beginning, and her education has made her unconsciously but supremely selfish. One can be that, and very sweet and amiable also. But talk to Margaret Wheatley of any lofty purpose in the world, of any living for God or humanity, and she would stare at me in blank amazement or pitying contempt for my romantic vagaries, and perhaps, in her exceeding good nature, propose, to amuse me — a splendid wine-supper — her father gives such. Faugh! Or she would gossip prettily over her friends’ charming breakfasts, or her own costly laces from the last steamer; and I, with my self-contempt hanging a



millstone about my neck, should sink smothered in that close, enervating atmosphere, into an idle, useless wretch, of no more worth in the world than my lady's lap-dog. How the thought would lash me at times that I had sold myself for money; and my secret soul would say to me, 'Coward and knave! The man who grooms your horses, the clown who builds your walls, is a king and a hero to you, — you who pride yourself on your breeding, your culture, your high ideals of life, your kid-glove philanthropy!'

"I see myself now, squandering my father-in-law's money in costly cigars, driving fine horses, striving to drown my self-loathing in an affected dilettanteism, criticising the last fine picture or new book. Better be a sailor in the forecastle, or with hard hands hewing trees on the frontiers, at guard with wild beasts and savages; better be anything that is honest, under God's heaven, than that thing which I have named."

Again there was a little silence. When Duke's inmost soul stirred and spoke to his family, there was a solid sense, a sledge-hammer ring of eternal truth, in what he said.

Across the silence slipped a little silvery, indignant laugh of Edith's. "If I really believed all this fine rhapsody of yours was true, Duke Walbridge, and that a little money, more or less, could work such havoc with your whole nature, I should think my brother was an awfully feeble specimen of his sex. Aren't you ashamed to slander yourself so?"

"Aren't you ashamed, Edith, to so misrepresent my



meaning? You know it was not the fortune, but the coming by it wrongly, which would be the ruin of me, just as it would had I stolen it."

"I think," said Gertrude, with a twinkle of fun in her eyes, "we may quote to Duke what Festus said to Paul. 'Much learning, Duke, doth make thee mad.'"

There was a shout of laughter from the younger girls, neither the mother nor eldest sister joining in it.

"I think," continued the latter, with much asperity, "he must have got into that state which some poet describes: —

" 'When life is half moonshine and half Mary Jane.'"

"No man who was not hopelessly moon-struck would ever dream of drawing such an impossible Dulcinea as a real live flesh-and-blood woman. If you labor under the illusion, Duke, that you have really beheld your 'Mary Jane,' do, for goodness' sake, enlighten us where in earth, air, or sea, you chanced upon the paragon?"

"I do think you are too bad, Edith, to make fun of your brother in that way," exclaimed Eva, who began to feel that it was time somebody ranged themselves on Duke's side, although it must be owned that young man had never yet proved himself unequal to his own defence against all the forces of ridicule and satire which his family occasionally brought to bear upon him. "I'm sure what he said sounded real grand, and I couldn't help thinking the woman he described was a little like —"



Eva stopped here, she could not tell why; it was hardly like the impulsive little puss; but she stopped. Everybody was breathless. Duke turned upon her, and his eyes seemed to command her.

"Like whom, Eva?" he said, slowly and gravely.

"Like Jessamine Holland," she answered.

Something came into his face; was it strength, light, joy? It was all these together.

"Yes," he answered, in a low, solemn, yet exultant tone, as though it was a grand truth whose knowledge came from some inmost depth of his soul, and it almost seemed as though one might hear the throb of his heart through the words, "I think it is a little like Jessamine Holland!"

Then they all knew, — at least all but Eva. There was a silence through the room. At last Edith spoke, with more angry energy than ever.

"Jessamine Holland! It is no more like her than it is like the rest of us. Duke, you are a fool!"

"I do not dispute it," he answered, in that icy tone, which always convinced them that it would be useless to attempt getting anything further out of him. In a few moments he went out.

His mother, without saying a word, rose up and went to her room. When she got there — it was a very unusual thing in Mrs. Walbridge, but she actually sat down in her chair and burst into tears.

In a few moments her two elder daughters joined her. They were a good deal shocked at the sight of their mother's distress.



"It is just as we feared. Jessamine Holland has stood in our way all the time," said Edith. "I wish she had never crossed our threshold."

"To think I'd set my heart so upon Margaret Wheatley being my boy's wife. It seems as though the disappointment would break it. And to have that strange, penniless girl in her stead."

"She never shall be," said Edith, bringing down her clenched hand on the table. Then she rose up and paced the room, and her face was dark with passion, and something looked out of her eyes which one, seeing there, would ever after have feared and dreaded in Edith Walbridge.

"I'll circumvent her by fair means or foul. Duke shall yet be Margaret Wheatley's husband."

"How in the world can that be, Edith?" asked her mother, catching at straws. "You heard what Duke said. You saw his look too."

"I don't care what he said, or what I saw. That strange girl has no business to come into our family and beguile our brother away from us, and frustrate all the happiness of two families, for we perfectly understand Mrs. Ashburn's feelings; and as for Margaret, Duke has only to ask her. It's demanding too much to require us to give up everything for that Jessamine Holland, even if her brother did save Duke's life."

"I wish the thing had never darkened our doors," added Gertrude, and her mother did not check her.

"For my part," continued Edith, "I'm going to relieve my mind. I frankly own that I hate and detest



the girl, and I think the circumstances fully justify me. Just think how she is at the bottom of all the unhappiness in our family. There is no doubt Duke would to-day be betrothed to Margaret Wheatley, if it had not been for this little country girl, with her pretty face and strange, wheedling ways. She is in no wise fitted to be Duke's wife, either by birth or circumstances, and we owe it to him and to ourselves to prevent a marriage of which we shall always be ashamed. I shall do my part, as I said, by fair means or foul."

Again, Mrs. Walbridge did not check this talk. The truth was, Jessamine Holland had taken, in the lady's eyes, the shape of her keenest disappointment, of her bitterest enemy. Was it wrong, then, to treat her as such?



## CHAPTER XVII.

“SOME quillet how to cheat the devil!” Edith Walbridge had been quoting Longaville’s words to herself a good many times of late; always, too, with a little amused smile, but something hard and bitter under the smile. Once, even, she found herself writing the words on a card. They stared up at her there in a way she did not like.

“Nonsense!” she said, and threw the card into the fire, just as she would any small foul thing that had dropped in her way.

That the devil must be at the bottom of Duke’s falling in love with Jessamine Holland, his eldest sister was quite ready to believe. How could it be otherwise when there was a Margaret Wheatley to be had for the right kind of asking? Had not Mason Walbridge’s daughters been brought up to regard wealth as the one chiefest good of life, no matter how energetically their mother might have denied this?

Edith had learned something more, — that it might not be easy always to combine wealth and the qualities most to one’s taste in a husband. She had a goodly list of offers in her own memory, which she could dis-



play on proper occasions. A goodly list as the world goes; but among the nabobs were several old enough to be her father. Indispensable as money was, the making of it, or the marrying for it, was not always agreeable.

Sometimes, to tell the honest truth, Edith was half repentant over her own engagement. Felix, with all those graces which made him the idol and herself the envy of so many women in her circle, must wait for the death of his rich bachelor uncle before he came into a fortune ample enough to gratify the ambition of his betrothed.

Should the golden river of Margaret Wheatley's wealth flow into Duke's channel, there was little doubt but some glittering streams might be diverted into the family pastures, where they would be very grateful.

So Edith Walbridge was not wholly animated at this time by pure solicitude for her brother's welfare. You will remember this, for it serves to explain the energy with which she laid her plot.

It seemed to Duke Walbridge almost as though some fate stood in the way of his getting out to the Kents as the days slipped off after his return. Each one he promised himself to go, and each one there was some pressing demand on his time by his mother or sisters, — of a kind, too, that he could not, without real ill-nature, decline to execute.

One morning, however, he grew desperate, mounted his horse, and, without saying a word to anybody, rode over to the Kents. At first he had refrained from doing



this, with a feeling that Miss Holland's mornings would be closely occupied; but the evenings had failed him, and his heart was the strong, passionate heart of a young man, and Jessamine Holland was the girl of its love.

It was many months since Miss Holland had had a morning to herself; but this one Mrs. Kent was so far indisposed that the lessons were intermitted. Jessamine drew a long breath over such an unusual luxury as a whole morning to do nothing.

During these last days the weather had changed, the winds had blown from the north a stern menace of the winter that was coming, and in the evenings the frosts had walked silent as fire, and swift and strong as that also, among the leaves and grasses.

A chill, too, had crept in-doors, and Mrs. Kent had said the day before, with a little shrug of her shoulders, when her husband talked of starting the furnace, "Dick, let us fancy we are poor folks again, and have a real old-fashioned wood-fire on the hearth. I was brought up on that, you know."

Jessamine laughed that low, amused, happy laugh of hers, which seemed to have gathered into itself some tinkle out of silvery bells, some sweetness from the first robin's throat poured into the blue of a May morning.

"I have dreamed that I was rich, by those wood-fires so very often; richer than there is any probability I shall ever be, sitting by grander ones."

Once in a while Jessamine turned the comic side of



that old poverty-stricken life toward her. Every human life has one, and every healthful human being sees it also sometimes ; but oftenest the girl's laughter shone through tears.

Mrs. Kent's wish, of course, was law with her husband, and the little household gathered around the fire in a merry mood, which softened as the fire grew and old memories crowded upon the three.

It stirred his boyhood in the heart of the man whose years more than doubled those of the fair young women on either side of him. He told them stories of his childhood, of his old mother, and of his hard battles with the world, and then went off on his travels around the globe, bringing close to their vision new horizons which lay out far beyond their narrow spheres, until the minutes slipped into hours, and the hours into midnight.

The next morning, when Mr. Kent renewed his talk of starting the furnace, Jessamine put in a plea again for a wood-fire, and she had it all to herself in the little sitting-room. Not without a run out-doors first in the autumn air, that stirred one's pulses with something better than champagne. It held now that cool, frosty chill which would melt in the broad noon sunshine. She had a race through the grounds to the pond which kept that great, solemn stretch of autumn sky in its wide depths ; she even went into the little cockle-shell of a boat there, and rocked in it like a child for a while ; then she whirled herself out and up among the fruit-trees, gathering handfuls of ripe plums and pears, and, sweeping off to the flower-beds, plucked some sprays of verbenas,



and twisted the scarlet flames in her hair. She was like a child let loose after six months of mornings which she could not call her own, if she excepted the Sundays. She had to work off in this way the first intoxication of freedom, and came in at last with a bloom of roses in her cheeks, her eyes full of a dark beryl sort of lustre, and something in her heart that was like the gladness of thrushes when they sing for the first time in May mornings.

The great mass of glittering flame was alive on the hearth when she came in. Her whole face was alive, too, when she saw it. At a little stand on one side were some poems, — Tennyson and Aurora Leigh. She had brought them both down last night, for the mellow sweetness of the ballads had been like wafted fragrance among her thoughts all day, broken into sometimes by the rumble of Mrs. Browning's words, like the thunder of the sea on distant coasts.

Jessamine took up one book and then the other, but she could not settle herself to read. Her heart was palpitating with the out-door life, with its vast spaces, its freedom, its untamed strength.

"I wish I was a gypsy, at least for this one day," she murmured, standing before the fire with that live, flushed face of hers, thinking what a bright, swift, strange thing fire was too.

"Miss Jessamine!" The voice was at her elbow, and she turned with a start and a little in-drawn cry. Was she an angel dropped right out of heaven, he half wondered, as she stood there with the little hat she had for-



gotten to take off, its brown plume shading one side of her face. The heat was in her cheeks which she had brought from out-doors a moment before.

Duke Walbridge had come in so softly that she had not heard him. They had not seen each other for several months, and they sat down by the fire in, let us suppose, a very brotherly, sisterly way.

"How well you are looking, Miss Jessamine! The teaching has agreed with you," he said.

The color came into her face under the strong, admiring gaze; but then it would have done so had Ross been in Duke's place.

"Yes," she said, a smile twinkling across her voice, as a little laugh did into her words, "I have begun to conclude that I have found my vocation, which is, you know, the first grand duty of life."

Duke Walbridge answered her in her own kind. It was wonderful how this young girl always struck the deep keys of his soul; whether of mirth and gladness, or pity, indignation, courage, strength, all the gamut of his soul yielded to her touch.

"You have lived farther than I, Miss Jessamine, for I have never discovered any especial vocation except for being lazy."

She shook her head. "You mistake me there. One side of my nature is always craving a life of sensuous ease, a picture of mere color and grace, a lotus land, not only of the senses, but of the soul."

Again that look in his eyes, bringing a more vivid color to her cheeks. It made her a little uneasy, and



with that unconscious motion of hers she put up her hand to brush back her hair, and brushed instead the plumes of her hat. It was in her lap the next moment.

“How ridiculous! Have I been sitting here all this time with my hat on?” The sprays of verbenas, like a thick swarm of fire-flies, quivering in her lap also. “The truth is, I was just in from a morning ramble, and brought some of the life back with me, and so forgot in-door proprieties.”

“I saw that, Miss Jessamine, in your eyes and face; but indeed the hat is so becoming that I could not choose but let it stay.”

Any of his sister's gallants would have said as much; but Duke was not a flatterer. When he complimented man or woman he meant it, and that gave weight to his praise.

The talk went after this to the summer. Duke was hardly enthusiastic over it. A good deal of it, he frankly admitted, was a bore; but then, girls must have their gayeties, at least those who have a relish for such things, and he supposed all did.

“I think so,” replied Jessamine, a little doubtfully. “As to the gayeties though, I hardly know, but the new sides of human life, and the scenery, and all those things,” — she drew one of those long breaths that often cut short her periods, but gave them a completeness which no words could.

“You, Miss Jessamine, you?” His gaze seeming to interrogate something which lay beyond the flushing of



the face. "I was just thinking how much brighter, how much happier you looked than most of the young women who have flirted, and danced, and dissipated away the summer at the springs and the seashore; yet to most of these, the life you have led here would have been an intolerable drudgery."

Her smile answered him, bright and clear as sunshine. "It has been work, and that, of course, is not always so pleasant as play, but it has not harmed me; indeed, the world looked so pleasant in my eyes this morning, while I was out there among the leaves and flowers, that I could not help thinking what a blessed and glorious thing it was to live here at all. I was so unutterably happy. Only, only —"

"Go on, Miss Jessamine."

"I could not help thinking, sometimes, of those others who are lonely, wretched, wicked, in the world. Somehow, in my happiest moments — I mean those which come to me at times, and seem fairly to overflow with their peace, their wealth and joy of life — I seem still to hear that undercurrent of misery from the heart of the world, as I have been told one may hear, through all the light and stillness of summer afternoons, the far-off murmur of the ocean upon the shore, not near enough to drown the other voices, but still winding into them with its distant roar and restlessness; and so I hear that vague undercurrent of restlessness, bewilderment, and pain haunting my happiest hours."

How she spoke after his own heart! Echoing the thoughts of his own soul! Think of Margaret Wheatley's



saying that! Why, the world outside of her own orbit was much to the banker's heiress as the happiness or misery of another planet!

The talk last night with his family was still quickening in Duke's soul. It had been almost like an avowal of love, and it seemed to have steadied and braced him. The sight of Jessamine's face, the sound of her voice after all this silence, worked some magic in him. He had never thought of telling Jessamine Holland the story of his love, without his heart beating in his throat, and his breath coming short and hard.

He had that faculty of idealism which is so peculiarly womanly, and yet without which no man is capable of the finest and highest love. This idealism wrought at times the bashfulness of a girl in the heart of the young man, and a large sense of unworthiness, which was forever tormenting the youth of Duke Walbridge. But some courage had entered into the man. For a moment, as he heard her speak, his love seemed to him a thing that he need not be ashamed of, — that he should not carry in secret like a woman's, unwooed; it was a thing that did him honor; he was not ashamed of it before God. Why was he in the presence of this woman, before whom he could say, at least, his soul was honored in loving her?

So, leaning forward, he took both her hands in his: "Ah, Jessamine, I have heard that undertone of which you speak; that echo of the world's plaint and misery has rung in my ears ever since my boyhood. And yet — God forgive me — if my eyes have been opened that



they could see, while I have done nothing to help to save my kind. That is the worst of it."

The soft, warm hands trembled a little in his, and then were quiet, for she was thinking of his words rather than of his act.

"You say, 'God forgive me,' for not helping the misery. I have to say it for a greater sin than that, Mr. Walbridge; for almost doubting his wisdom, his goodness, his existence even, — sitting up there in the great, white calm of his heavens, and letting this great, awful wail of humanity go up to him, and not stirring to help it, — he, with the courage and the power. Are you shocked with me?"

"Shocked with you, my child," — she seemed like one to him for the moment, — "when I have often asked myself, looking out on this great muddle of a world, whether I was infidel or atheist, — feeling, as Robinson says, 'the awful cracking of the ice of doubt under one's feet.'"

The tears came into her eyes, her smile shining across them too. "That is it," she said. "But it is only at times I go down into these awful abysses of doubt, and the grass in the fields, the singing of a little bird, the sunshine on the hills, all come like the voices of angels, to refute my fears. I know that God lives, and so does his unspeakable Gift, the Christ he gave us."

"Yes," Duke answered her; "in my truest moments I *know* that, and I know, too, what that Christ's example was, which I do not follow."

"Ah! we can all say that," — with her sweetly



serious face. "I have often wondered what I was doing for God in his world."

"You! you! Ah, Miss Jessamine, you are doing good that you do not know."

"Where? What? There is Ross, I know, but he is my brother, and I love him because I cannot help it, any more than I can help breathing; but it is the great world around me; there are so many hearts that need comforting, so many feet that stumble, so many who need a hand even as feeble as mine is to help, or at least to point the right way. I cannot find my work, but I think one is sure to do that, if only one's heart is thoroughly in it. It must be that we are all here to do some good in God's world."

"I think so." Then his glance went over and fell upon Aurora Leigh on the table. "After all, how much grander Romney Leigh's failure was than most men's success, even if it is the mighty success of dollars and cents! We sneer at the Israelites, Miss Jessamine, but our own age, with all its science, its culture, and its material advancement, is still at the old work in the wilderness, building golden calves, and worshipping them."

"Yes, my range is narrow, but it commands horizon enough to see that; yet, if there is great danger in having too much money, there is, it seems to me, a greater in having too little. I used to think money was the one good in life, when that poverty bore down so awfully upon my youth; and, O Mr. Walbridge, money is a good thing, — a very few thousands would bring back Ross to me!"



"A most necessary thing. The being born with a silver spoon in my mouth may work my deadly ruin; but I will never drift into that silly twaddle about poverty's allowing, in fact, the only Arcadian innocence and happiness. A man with a luxurious dinner before him may talk very prettily and very absurdly about hunger. Let him one day face the hard, grim fact, not breaking his fast with bread and butter. The life is better than meat, and the body than raiment; but He who said this did not mean that it was good to go cold or starving."

This was strange talk between a young man and woman. Just imagine the Walbridge girls' lovers talking like this! They expected queer things of that "smart, odd Duke," but I think, if they could have heard him this morning, they would have half doubted whether he had not gone "clean daft."

And to think that all the graces, and airs, and charms with which men have been won from time immemorial, should go for nothing with Duke, while he should actually fall in love with a young woman discussing themes which would be admirable coming from a parson in the pulpit on a Sunday; but the idea of two rational human beings courting in that way!

"You say," continued Jessamine, "that the silver spoon may work your deadly ruin, Mr. Walbridge. Did you mean so much as that?"

"Yes, just so much. Look now at the lazy, worthless life I've been leading this summer, for instance, dancing attendance on the girls from one fashionable resort to another, lounging through the days in idleness and lux-



ury, a bootless search after excitement and pleasure. I knew all the time that it was totally unworthy of a man and a man's life, this miserable frittering away of existence — growing cynical and bitter over the ambitions of people as silly and contemptible as your own. If I were the son of a poor man, how different it would all have been! I should at least have earned my honest bread by the sweat of my brow, instead of having other hands butter it on both sides for me, not certain whether my self-contempt had salt enough in it to keep me from spoiling. Do you think it has, Miss Jessamine?"

He had loosened her hands long ago, but he turned now and faced her with a kind of hungry eagerness working in his mouth and eyes, which told to a close observer that her answer was one of life or death to him.

Jessamine looked up, and something which she did not know rose in her eyes. Something of that look with which tender women, whom we read of, have girded men for the battle, or followed them to the scaffold. "Yes," she said, "I think there is salt enough to save you. I would trust you!"

Her voice was steady, her sweet, bright smile moved like a light held over them across her words. The sight shook the young man to his soul. A great longing to tell her all that had been in his heart for the last months came upon him — the words clamored at his throat — his pulse flew at his wrist like a frightened bird's; he rose up; for the first time in his life his hand dropped on her hair, a soft, tender, caressing motion. "Jessamine! Jessamine!" He could not get any farther, his



throat was parched, the clamoring words choked on his dry lips.

“Yes,” said Jessamine.

He did not know it, but Duke Walbridge’s heart had put itself into that cry; its hunger, its hope, its fear. Jessamine heard it. She was a woman; she knew what it meant. Her heart leaped a moment, and then steadied itself. What was there to shake her whole being like this silent storm? Duke Walbridge would never say anything to her, Jessamine Holland, that she should be ashamed or afraid to hear. Her cheeks were brighter than the crimson of the fire; but her voice held its tones, — those tones so full of sweetness, feeling and force underlying all the sweetness.

“Yes, Mr. Walbridge.”

The next moment which died into silence strained his soul cruelly. It seems to me that such a moment always must a man like Duke Walbridge. But when he spoke his voice, too, was steady, although one felt the passionate power which burned under the low words.

He was standing by her chair, leaning over it; she could hardly tell whether there were touches of his hand in her hair, but she felt his fingers close to it; their faces were turned away so that neither could see the other.

“Miss Jessamine, I have a question to ask you, which I have never asked to any woman; it is one which concerns all our future, — a question the most vital to both of us. If I shall ask it, whichever way you answer, will you forgive me?”



She knew then what was coming. It was strange, she remembered it afterward, how with all her fluttering, most maidenly, most natural, with her cheeks hot, as though the flames were close upon them, and her breath swift as one that leaps away from pursuers, a great central peace and calm entered into her soul.

“I promise you.”

His hand — no — it was not that, it was his lips dropping on her hair a kiss, light and soft as the dropping of dew through starry nights.

“You have given me the courage to ask the question now,” he said; but he did not. She was glad, and for him it seemed better to wait a little until the heat had gone out of his brain and heart, and he could speak or write calmly; and then, too, those words of hers had set him suddenly in a great heaven of hope. He drew his breath with an ecstasy whose joy was almost pain; shining horizons were all around him; he was a young man, and the maiden who sat there was the love of his youth.

Then they turned, as by some mutual instinct, and looked in each other's faces, these two, so singularly fashioned by birthright of soul for comprehension, for sympathy, for entering into each other's solemnest moods, whether of grief or gladness, into all thought, aspiration, emotion, — these two, standing still in the broad, luminous country of their youth, — these two, to whom love would be something blessed, holy, immortal; which, alas! it is to so few men and women!

They gazed a moment, as though each was a new mir-



acle to the other. Each face was stirred and luminous. For an instant Duke Walbridge felt that the right moment to speak had come now. He opened his lips, but the weight of joy at his heart pressed down the words and held them back.

If he had yielded, and spoken then, what might not have been saved to both of them ! But he went away, with some instinct to be alone with his own soul and God just then, taking his leave of Jessamine in the old, friendly fashion, clasping her hand and holding it a moment, and adding over it what the tones made a prayer, " God bless you ! "

She was alone then, once more, by the fire ; but what a changed world it had grown since she sat there in just that way ! Yet it was a world hardly an hour older. Thoughts of her childhood, of her parents, of Ross, of Hannah Bray, swayed over her, and then everything else was swallowed up in the conviction that she and Duke Walbridge loved each other. What did that mean ? It meant being one in heart and soul — it meant dwelling together — her breath gasping under the weight of her thoughts. She remembered, too, Duke's father and mother, and sisters, with some tenderness quickening in her soul. Would they be glad or sorry over the son and brother's choice ?

She knew — this little Jessamine — the things they valued chiefest, — the gold and the place. She could bring them no marriage dowry ; but she knew how they loved Duke, and she hoped for his sake they would take her into the family heart.



At last, all these long, swift thoughts drowned themselves in slow, happy tears, sliding up from the great joy of her heart into her eyes, and wetting her cheeks; and the fire grew low, humming on the hearth, and gathered itself slowly up into gray ashes, and the broad noon sunshine warmed the room. How happy she was, sitting there all alone! She would never forget that hour. It would hold its light aloft over all her future life, — over all the cares and griefs that waited below.

What would Ross say, she wondered, her thoughts slipping off again, easily as tides slip up bare reaches of sandy coast, and take hold upon the rocks beyond. Would he be willing to give her, his little Jessamine, even to his dearest friend? or would he only feel that he had been rifled of the best treasure of his life; of her who had said so often, "I shall never love anybody as I love you, Ross"?

She did not love him less now; her heart had only widened to take in that other. Was she good enough, though, for this great gift God had suddenly dropped into her life? All that only He and Jessamine knew of her faults and weaknesses rose up before her, and humbled her with an awful sense of ill-desert. Let Him be witness to her resolve how well she would love, how wisely she would live with His help; the slow slipping of tears upon her cheeks, from great depths of her soul, broken up, and the fire dropping as slowly out of its bright, swift, strong life into dull, gray ashes, just as our own lives drop with all their bright, swift strength into the dark silences of



the grave, — only one part of our lives, “the meat and the raiment.”

At last the clock struck noon. The girl started up at the strokes. She had not heard the low, silvery chimes until now, although they had floated across the room for several hours.

As she passed Mrs. Kent's room on the way to her own, the lady, hearing the footfalls, called her in. The young matron sat there in her pink dressing-gown, a picture of pretty, semi-invalidism.

“Isn't it delightful to have a holiday once in six months, Miss Jessamine? But what have you been doing with it?” she asked.

“Not much of anything, I believe,” replied Jessamine, thinking, after all, that this had been the most wonderful day of her life, a miracle among all its commonplace kin.

“Have we had callers? I thought I heard a gentleman's step in the hall.”

“Yes. Mr. Walbridge was here for some time.”

It was nothing surprising. Duke was in the habit of coming to the Kent's, and of course he would call soon after his return home. But it may be that Jessamine paused a moment before she answered, or that some consciousness throbbed into her tones. Mrs. Kent probably could not herself tell why she turned and looked at her friend. But she did, and saw something in Jessamine's face which she would also have found it hard to name. But her instincts were keen, and, though she said nothing, a suspicion of the truth entered her mind.



Notwithstanding her weakness in Greek, which had been so unfortunately displayed at one time, Mrs. Kent had a native delicacy which prevented any utterance of her thoughts on this matter, even in a jest.



## CHAPTER XVIII.

THAT night Duke Walbridge wrote a letter to Jessamine Holland. His whole soul throbbed in every word, for he was too proud to hold anything back; not a long letter, but its passion of tenderness, its hope, its humility, were of the sort which weld themselves into brief sentences, quick with life. Whatever her answer would be, Duke Walbridge could depend on the soul of the woman to whom his soul was speaking. He did not woo her with any soft phrases, with any lover's fine talk and flatteries; he would not so wrong her; he did not even woo her with many promises; far less did he sue abjectly for what one felt was more to him than life. He wanted no gift out of her pity; if there was no voice in her own heart to plead for him more eloquently than his words, then Duke Walbridge must put away the gift, even though that gift were the hand of Jessamine Holland.

Yet he left her in no doubt what she could be to him; how his soul needed her, as souls of all men who can love highest and truest need the soul of some other woman, after their own kind, as Hamlet needed Ophelia, as Romney Leigh needed Aurora, or as men who have no high gifts nor great place in the world need women whose



purity and tenderness shall inspire and ennoble whatever of best is in them.

Yet he did not spare himself. Duke Walbridge's worst enemy would hardly have dealt so harshly with his faults and weaknesses as he did, as only he would do it, too, to God and the woman that he loved, — there being this power in the man, his better self could always look down with a strong scorn on his lover, few, alas ! having the clear vision of Duke Walbridge.

So he asked her if, knowing all this, his pitiable sin and weakness, she could come to his need and help him, not for pity's sake, but for love's. If she could, or could not, let her send some sign, either by words or silence, such as suited her best.

He laid the letter away, when it was finished, in his writing-cabinet, locking that, and tossing the key into a small tray of carved woods, which he had picked up in Switzerland, and then a new calm entered his soul, stilling all its hot fever of doubt and disquiet. It was too late to send the letter that day, he would wait until the morrow.

Meanwhile, vigilant eyes kept watch on him. Edith Walbridge had managed most adroitly to keep Duke from visiting the Kents for nearly a week after their return home. But the delay must have an end, and even Edith, with all her skill, could not have succeeded without the co-operation of her mother and other sisters.

He had, of course, no suspicion of the influences at work to keep him from Jessamine Holland. But he would make his own opportunity to see her. Trust Duke



Walbridge for accomplishing that on which he had set his heart.

Edith, narrowly watching, saw that he was absent at table ; if he jested with the girls, his heart was not in it. She knew her brother.

Where had Duke been that morning? If she could only keep guard over him all the time !

Suddenly Eva spoke : “ We have none of us called upon Miss Holland since our return. It is quite too bad. Duke, will you drive Kate and me out to the Kents after dinner ? ”

“ I saw Miss Holland this morning,” replied Duke.

“ Oh, you did,” thought Edith. “ I suspected as much from your manner, young man.”

Other people at the table had their thoughts too, but each one kept silent.

“ Why didn’t you let us know you were going, so that we might send Miss Holland some messages ? ” said Kate, who was in the family secret, and quite provoked that her brother had stolen this march upon them.

“ I never thought of that, Kate ; but you will drive out soon and take them yourself.”

“ Did she have no messages for us ? ” asked Mrs. Walbridge, who would have found it a slight relief to her feelings to convict Miss Holland of a want of courtesy, in default of anything stronger to bring against her.

“ She made very kind inquiries after you all ; but she had learned of our return two days ago, and naturally waited to hear from some of us.”

To all this no objection could be urged. Edith suc-



ceeded in ascertaining that her brother had not seen Mrs. Kent.

“Duke and Jessamine must have had a long *tête-à-tête* together, then. What had passed between them?” She scrutinized him more narrowly than ever.

After dinner he went off to his chair with a book; but he did not read it. He only sat there silent and absorbed.

“Why didn’t you come downstairs when we sent for you to see the Murrays — the first time they have called since our return?” asked Gertrude.

“Because” — a moment’s pause, but subterfuge was not in Duke’s line — “I had some writing to do, and wished to finish it.”

Edith was wide awake. What writing had Duke to do important enough to keep him upstairs a couple of hours after his return from a call on Jessamine Holland? She was alive now to every straw that blew in her way.

After a while Duke rose up and went out. Edith went also to the door and listened, she hardly could have told why, but she heard her brother inquire of the chambermaid whether John, the coachman, had come in.

Her affirmative sent him down into the kitchen. Edith had never constituted herself her brother’s keeper, but now her suspicions were all alert.

After a short parley with the coachman, she heard her brother go out, and slipped downstairs.

“John, what was it that Mr. Duke wanted of you just now?” demanded Edith Walbridge in her imperious way, her eyes holding the man’s face.



He shuffled uneasily, put one heavy foot before the other, shrugged his broad shoulders, and at last stammered out, "I — he said I was to say nothing about it."

John was fond of his young master, and wished to be loyal to him.

"No matter what he said, John; he wanted you to do some private errand for him to-morrow."

It was not an easy thing to resist Edith Walbridge, even had keener wit and stronger will than John the coachman's entered the lists against her.

"As you knew it beforehand, it isn't betrayin' Mr. Duke to say that was what he wanted."

"And the private errand was to go out to the Kents?"

"You seem to know all about it, Miss Edith."

John was no little perplexed in his turn, and uncomfortable, too, betwixt his loyalty to Duke and his awe of the imperious young woman.

Edith herself was a little startled at this confirmation of her worst fears. "John," she continued, with the tone and air of a lawyer who is bent on frightening a reluctant witness into disclosing whatever facts may be in his possession, "did Duke tell you what your errand was to be at the Kents?"

John drew a long breath of relief. "No, on my honor, Miss Edith, he never breathed a word there. He only said I was to ride out for him the first thing in the morning. I should know what the errand was when the time came."

Edith was satisfied that she had forced out of bungling, good-natured John, — who was much more at home man-



aging a vicious horse, than he was with an intriguing woman, — all that he had to tell.

With a peremptory charge not to repeat a syllable of her questions to her brother, Edith went upstairs slowly. She paused a moment, doubtfully, at the drawing-room door, and listened to the merry hum inside, and then, her face settling into something hard and dark, she brought down her clenched hand on the knob. "I shall ask nobody's advice at this crisis. I shall act at once. The time is short now;" and she went on with her dark, resolute face, past her own room to her brother's.

The door here was always unlocked. The gas through the ground glass made a light like that of misty moonshine through the room. Edith went straight to the cabinet, found the key lying loose in the tray. Duke Walbridge would as soon thought of hiding his purse from his mother and sisters, lest they should pilfer its contents, as to dream of their using the key to his cabinet during his absence.

Edith's heart beat fast. She had never felt like a thief before in her life. She had to say to her conscience, "I am compelled to do it; Duke has no right to sacrifice his whole family to that miserable girl."

Then, with steady fingers, she set the key in the lock, and turned it. She opened the drawer, and in a few moments' search drew out the letter, laid carefully away in the box, in one corner, the letter not yet so much as folded.

Edith brightened the light, and, standing there, she went over all that Duke had written to Jessamine Hol-



land, line by line, word by word; her breath coming faster, her face growing whiter all the time. When she was done, she sat down in a chair. "It is worse than I thought," she said. "He loves her like that — like that!" the words coming slowly, as though each one hung a weight upon her lips.

Then she sat silent. No need to strain her ear for a footstep. Duke's tread along the hall always rung loud and swift, and he would not be likely to return soon.

She saw the stars holy and bright, and afar off. What wonder her brother had carried his burdened thoughts and heart out to their great silence and sympathy! Something unsteady, something like trouble or relenting, came into Edith's face. Such a letter — the story of such a love, wrought its magic on her for a while. She had had lovers and offers, plenty of them. She thought of that now, but not with any swell of vanity or exultation; she only thought that no one of those had ever wooed her, had ever loved her as her brother had wooed and loved this Jessamine Holland, and a pang of remorse smote the girl, as she thought of the two lives she would deliberately wreck, if she reached out her hands between them.

She looked at them for a moment, lying by the letter in her lap. "White, unclean hands," they seemed to her just then, with all their fairness! "It is a miserable work," she said. "I am half minded to leave them alone, and let Duke 'gang his ain gate,' even if that does lead away from Margaret Wheatley."

I want you to remember, in all that happened after-



ward, that Edith Walbridge said this once — said it alone, and honestly to her own soul.

But the name of Margaret Wheatley seemed a spell which supplanted the hold that Duke's letter had briefly taken of her feelings.

The old instincts, the old reasoning, swayed back on Edith Walbridge. She remembered the wealth, position, not only for himself, but for his family, which were all at stake at this moment.

What were the dreams of a romantic young man in comparison?

Duke would get over his love, and be happier in the end, and just a million times better off with Margaret Wheatley than he would with Jessamine Holland. He was an only son and brother. Surely he owed something to his mother and sisters.

The girl's face grew harder and darker. "I have said that Duke never should marry this Jessamine Holland," she muttered to herself, "and I am not going to back down now."

Then she rose up and went out, doubting whether she had better admit any of her sisters to her secret, and concluding that now, when the matter had grown so serious, she would confide the whole only to her mother.

A little sign brought Mrs. Walbridge up to her daughter's room within the next quarter of an hour.

The lady listened in silence to all that Edith related, for the girl made a clean breast of the method by which she had obtained Duke's secret, and concluded by reading his letter to Jessamine Holland.



“What do you think of all that, mamma?”

“Think, Edith! There is no help for it! The boy is lost! My boy, on whom I had set my pride, my hopes! Would to God she had never entered our house! I am a wretched woman!”

For once Mrs. Walbridge broke through all her habits of well-bred restraint, and was honestly dramatic. The blow went deep; yet she had a mother's heart, and for the time, at least, she felt that a love like Duke's must not be sacrificed to any ambitions. If she pitied herself, she pitied her boy also.

Edith's voice recalled her; the younger woman calmest and clearest now.

“There is no use sitting still and wringing our hands, mamma. What we do must be done without delay.”

“There is nothing to do,” answered the mother, melting down into tears. “Before such a letter as that, one is utterly helpless. The thing is done, Edith.”

“No, it isn't done while I have any sense left to plan and circumvent,” answered the daughter, grimly resolute.

“Why, Edith, my child, what will you do? Under any other circumstances, I should say you have already gone too far.”

“Mother, I have said that Duke Walbridge should never marry Jessamine Holland. I meant it then—I mean it now;” her voice slow and steady, like one who carries a fixed purpose along it.

“What can you do, Edith?” again inquired the mother.  
“There is that letter.”



“I do not mean that Jessamine Holland shall ever see this letter,” answered still and steadily, with weights of will hanging upon each word, the voice of Edith Walbridge.



## CHAPTER XIX.

IN the portrait which I have endeavored to draw of Mrs. Walbridge, that lady would be the last to recognize her own lineaments. The faintest suggestion that she formed the prototype of this picture would amaze and shock her; she would honestly regard herself as the most injured and maligned of women; nay, more, she would promptly and indignantly denounce the course which, in real life, and under the pressure of strong temptation, she sanctioned, if she did not actively promote.

Ah! if one only had, as Mrs. Stowe says, "a relay of bodies," and could step from one into another, and contemplate quietly one's own part in this great, swift drama of human life, how much wiser and soberer we should all grow, with the new perspective and the wider reach of vision! But Mrs. Walbridge had wrought herself up into a state of mind which could only see things from one stand-point, and that one, herself, a disappointed, distressed, outraged mother; her only son about to sacrifice himself, the victim of an artful, designing girl, who had abused all the claims which her brother's deed gave her on the family gratitude, by ingratiating herself into the young man's affections, thereby blighting the hopes of two



households, and breaking the heart of the girl who had loved him from her childhood, and who alone had the right to become his wife. Thus Mrs. Walbridge reasoned, — in a rather dramatic way, it must be admitted, for a woman of her repose and dignity; but, then, the finest and calmest of us, even to Lady Clara Vere de Vere herself, can be dramatic under sufficient pressure. So, when Edith avowed strongly her determination of never letting Jessamine Holland see that letter of Duke's, the mother looked at her daughter, startled and amazed; but no words of indignant horror shamed the girl into silence before her deed, set her face to face with its sin and guilt.

“Edith, do you know what you are saying, or are you going distraught with all this misery?” stammered the mother.

“No. Look at me, and see, mamma. I was never cooler in my life; and there is need enough of it, — one wants steady brain and calm nerves now; but, I say it again, you shall never see this letter, Jessamine Holland!”

There was no doubt Edith Walbridge knew what she was doing, though her eyes blazed out as she threw the letter on the floor, and set her foot on it, sure that the small, delicate shoe would leave no trace of itself on the paper. Had it been Jessamine Holland's neck, at that moment, it seemed to her she could have stamped with a better will.

“Jessamine Holland not see the letter!” repeated her mother, still staring at her daughter.

“I have said so,” continued Edith; “and I am not



given to rash promises. I have rather expected the consummation would take this form, and I have prepared myself to meet it—though there was no telling—it might have been some other, and then I must have laid my train differently. On the whole, I am glad that it is a letter. Get that in one's hand, and one is master of the situation; and once destroyed, the thing tells no tales. If Duke had spoken to her, it would have been much more difficult to deal with the thing, though even then I would not have despaired."

She had lifted the letter now, and was carefully smoothing a wrinkle in it, talking, it seemed, less to her mother than to herself.

Mrs. Walbridge felt an involuntary shiver all over her. She began to see darkly into this talk of her daughter, and she felt a sensation much as though she were standing on the brink of some awful precipice, and a chill wind came out of the darkness, and blew upon her. She drew close to her daughter; her lips were white, as she laid her hand on the girl's arm and whispered, "Edith, tell your mother what this is you intend to do."

Even Edith glanced around the room a little nervously, as though, as absurd as the idea was, she half-feared there might be some one listening in the corners. Then she drew nearer to her mother, and in a low undertone, yet in a strong, rapid, excited way, went over the plan which she had been maturing for several days. "The first thing was to make certain that that letter should never fall into Jessamine Holland's hands."

"But, Edith," interrupted her mother, in a voice



whose rapid impatience did not seem like the calm, smooth voice of Mrs. Walbridge, "how are you going to prevent this? Duke will certainly find out the —" There was a pause; the lady was not fond of strong, unflinching words, which set a fact right before one, stripped of all its guises. "What you have done — and you know your brother! I shudder to think of the consequences of his learning that his mother or his sisters have deceived him."

"No, Duke won't find it out either," exclaimed Edith, with great energy. "Do you think I shall play the desperate game, into which I am forced, so poorly?"

"O Edith, it is a miserable thing, looked at from any side. I feel quite powerless over its magnitude. I do not know what to advise — what to do."

"Well," continued Edith, resolutely, "it is no time now to sit still and fold our hands, and deplore the state of affairs. This letter once in Jessamine Holland's hands, the thing is done. She will be Duke's betrothed wife within twenty-four hours if we do not interfere. You see that, mamma?"

"Yes, I see that only too clearly," sighed the mother.

"I've made up my mind," continued Edith, "that my brother shall not sacrifice himself and his family, and the woman who, I have not a doubt, really loves him, without my making an effort to save him. The case is desperate, and it won't do to be squeamish about the means."

Silence on the mother's part made assent to the daughter's speech.



“There is but one way open. Duke must suppose that Jessamine Holland has received his letter, while, instead of ever coming into that young lady’s hands, it must go into the flames.”

Mrs. Walbridge started, and her face grew paler. “Edith, my child, do you know where you are treading?”

“Precisely, mamma. But I am my brother’s sister, and intend to save him from the effects of his own folly.”

That was “putting it” most plausibly, hiding all the ugly facts behind this flimsy gossamer of specious words.

“But if the letter is destroyed, Duke will be certain to find it out. A man who loves a woman as we see he must, will not easily give her up.”

“I do not so read Duke, mamma. You know his Quixotic ideas about love; and his pride and sensitiveness would both come to my aid in keeping him from pressing his suit. Once believing that Jessamine Holland has read this letter, any coolness or silence on her part will be interpreted as a rejection of his offer. Once, and only once, would Duke Walbridge lay bare his heart like this to the woman of his love. I know him. The stronger his affection, the less he would be likely to urge it, if he deemed her reluctant. *He*, suing and pleading for any woman’s love, without she could give it to him freely, absolutely, joyfully! I think he would go first to the scaffold.”

This reasoning evidently made a good deal of impres-



sion on the mother. She sat thoughtful for several moments before she added, "But you forget that the two must be constantly meeting, and that Duke must certainly discover by Miss Holland's manner that she has never received his letter?"

A dark smile came into the girl's handsome face. "Do you think me so short-sighted, mamma? Edith Walbridge tie her bag in that loose fashion!"

"Well, Edith, what next?" impatient and anxious.

"It is evident enough, from this letter, that whatever he may have given the girl reason to suspect, Duke has not really committed himself. He must have come mighty close to it this morning; but, luckily, some good fate held him back. Now, my plan is to see Miss Holland before another sun sets, and acquaint her of Duke's engagement with Margaret Wheatley. I shall find some way of bringing it in naturally and easily, so she will suspect nothing. And I know my young woman also; and, although I do most cordially hate her, I am very certain she, too, has some high notions of honor which will not permit her, whatever she may feel, to be any woman's rival. Of course all such stuff is purely absurd; still, I have no disposition to quarrel with it where it so well serves my turn. The next thing is to get the two out of each other's way, so that there will be no chance for meetings and mutual explanations. Duke must be sent off without delay, mamma."

"But that is more easily said than done, Edith. He will not be likely to go without some most excellent reason."



“That is precisely what you and I must find, — a most ‘excellent reason.’ If I can get the matter so far in train, I’ll trust to luck and my native wits to manage any further complications that may arise. I’m taking a precious deal of trouble for your sake, Duke Walbridge.”

But if Edith could have looked all her motives in the face, she would have found that it was not so much for her brother’s sake as her own that she had been plotting and weaving through all these days and nights, until at last the snares were set, and the net made ready for its victims.

Mrs. Walbridge stared at Edith with some new, half-terrified sense of her eldest daughter’s power. She herself would never have been equal to projecting a scheme of this kind; and, to do her justice, she was above it morally.

You may remember that I said long ago that Edith was her mother’s superior in force of character. She was to prove that now.

With all her dignity and conventional judgment, Mrs. Walbridge was not a woman for strong emergencies, for startling and unusual conjunctions. In certain grooves, the lady could go through her part in the drama of life with a charming dignity and propriety, always equal to the occasion, always a pleasing and harmonious figure.

But this human life of ours, which we have pieced out so carefully into some pretty mosaic, is suddenly broken up with some great earthquake shock, and the colors about which we have busied our souls, setting them after



the right pattern, are all tumbled together, as when a wind swept over the block steeples and houses of our childhood.

So Mrs. Walbridge found the walls tumbling about her ears. Her old grooves, her pretty conventional codes, would not serve her now; and these had stood to her in place of the eternal God over her head.

In her sudden dismay, looking on every side and finding no help, and having wrought herself up into a belief that her son was about to plunge headlong into a marriage, sacrificing himself and his family, almost any deed which would save him from the lifelong effects of his madness seemed justifiable in her eyes. Her partialities and prejudices confused and blinded her moral vision.

After all, reader, can you and I say much more of ourselves? If we can, we are a great deal better than most people whom I know, — very good people too.

Yet Mrs. Walbridge's vision saw quite far enough through the mists and murk for her own ease. Nervous and tearful, in a way strongly contrasted with her usual composure, she exclaimed, "O Edith, it is a miserable, miserable thing, from beginning to end — all this deception and intrigue. It terrifies me to think of it."

"It terrifies me more to look the other way, and see where we shall all be if something isn't done to prevent it."

Poor little Jessamine Holland! What terrible dismay and misery was that innocent young head going to bring into the Walbridge family; and yet, if she had only had a fortune that equalled Margaret Wheatley's, Duke



would have found no obstacles in the way of his choice.

Mr. Walbridge's entrance put a sudden end to the consultation of the ladies. He was a little out of humor that evening, having received letters from the West regarding some extensive mining speculations which he had made in the territories. The matter required his immediate presence there, and the prospect of a journey to Oregon was not agreeable to a man of his age and plethoric habits.

Edith caught suddenly at this grumbling talk with, "Pa, why couldn't you send Duke out now? He could at least look up your interests; and, as you say, a journey across half a continent is an awful undertaking at your time of life, — wretched hotels, and more wretched meals. Duke is young, and ought to enjoy the whole trip."

Her father grumbled something about, "'Twas all very well for women to talk, but Duke knew nothing about the business."

But Edith understood all her father's weak points, and always slipped easily among his angularities. One of these days she would do just so with her husband, where a far higher principled woman might have come up point-blank against his obstinacies, and thence ensued the old tale of domestic misery.

So Edith proceeded to draw a picture of a journey to Oregon, holding up the discomforts by night and by day, in colors that made her father's nerves twinge and his bones ache.



Then Mrs. Walbridge brought up her forces to the rescue by informing him that his son was on the eve of plunging himself into irretrievable ruin by marrying beneath him, and that the only hope of saving the boy from wrecking himself was to get him away from the object of his unhappy devotion.

Mr. Walbridge stared at this announcement, and hemmed several times. Jessamine Holland had always been rather a favorite with the elderly gentleman; and when it came to a daughter-in-law he would have welcomed her with as stately a bow and as fatherly a kiss as he would the banker's daughter. Fond as the man was of money, he had fancied that the easiest or surest method of possessing it was not by marrying a rich woman. But in a matter which concerned her son and daughters Mrs. Walbridge's influence was all-powerful. It was enough that she, backed by Edith, disapproved of Duke's choice, and declared herself the most miserable of women should he take to wife any other than Margaret Wheatley.

Amidst the energetic talk of both women, the man did interpose once with, "But, my dear, money is not the only desirable thing in a wife. You know I married you with very little."

"That is an entirely different matter, Mr. Walbridge," his wife answered, in a tone that implied the difference was patent to blind eyes. Mr. Walbridge took this for granted, although he could not exactly see the point.

Perhaps the lady was not altogether unconscious of some inherent weakness in her remark; for her next movement was a masterpiece of feminine strategy. "I



never expected, Mr. Walbridge, that at this day you would accuse me, the mother of your children, of not bringing you a fortune ! ” in a tone nicely balanced between injury and indignation.

“ My dear, how absurd ! ” — a good deal flustered ; for Mr. and Mrs. Walbridge were not in that habit of petty bickering, which eats out the happiness of so many married people. “ You know I could not have intended anything of that sort.”

“ Well, pa, I must admit it sounded very much as though you did,” interposed Edith, who felt it best to support her mother on every point to-night.

Mr. Walbridge muttered something about “ women always finding bugbears where nobody else thought of them.” But if he was a little crosser, he was a little more plastic in their hands, and at any rate the women carried their point that Duke was, if possible, to be prevailed upon to undertake the journey to his father’s mining lands.

Edith did not induct her father deeper into the plot. He had some notions of business honor that he might carry into other matters ; and as to surreptitiously possessing one’s self of a man’s love-letter, and destroying it, leaving him all the time to suppose that the woman of his seeking had received and scorned it, — even Mrs. Walbridge would find it difficult to convince her husband was doing just the right thing.

He, at one time during this interview, avowed his determination of “ not setting about breaking up the thing in this underhand way. He would have a talk with Duke, and put the whole thing before him in a reasonable light.”



“Pa,” said Edith, lifting up both her hands, “if you are bent on this marriage, heart and soul, you will have no difficulty in accomplishing it in that way.”

“Talk reasonably with a man who is in love, Mr. Walbridge! I have always hitherto regarded you as a remarkably sensible man,” added his wife, in a tone of solemn despair.

The man hemmed again two or three times, and at last went off to his paper, thinking this a matter which the women would best manage, and with a rather uncomfortable consciousness of the lack of masculine tact in general.

Edith returned to Duke’s chamber, and placed his letter back in the drawer, precisely where she had found it. “There! I think you will tell no tales now,” she said, locking the drawer.

An hour later Duke returned, and read over the precious letter for the first time since he had written it.

His heart beat high, and his face grew hot as a bashful girl’s over her first love-letter. It was Duke’s first too, and Edith was right, — “it told no tales.”

The next moment John had his orders very clearly from his young master. He was to take a letter over to the Kents, and deliver it into Miss Holland’s hands. He need not wait for an answer.

Afterward, John presented himself, in accordance with his promise, at Miss Edith’s door. He could not tell why, but he would certainly have given considerable to be away from it at that moment. The young lady was evidently expecting him. “Well, John, what did Duke say?” was her first salutation.



“I was to deliver the letter into Miss Holland’s hands and no others. I was not to wait for an answer.”

“Let me see the letter, will you, John?”

What could he do? Refuse the beautiful, imperious woman standing there? It would take stouter moral fibre than the coachman’s to do that. Yet John was certainly conscious of another uncomfortable feeling, as the letter passed out of his hands. Edith was standing by her table, and for some reason the coachman’s eyes watched her keenly.

She turned her back to him. There was a window opposite. It would seem that she wanted to see the address in a strong light; but the watchful man somehow fancied that her hand went down on the table, and that she took up something lying there. Did she put something down also?

What business had John with such questions? Yet they came into his brain, — not a wondrously acute one either.

She read the address out loud, but in a low tone, as though to herself, then turned toward John, and held out the letter with a smile.

“Here it is, John. I want you to accommodate me in a very small matter, and in the end you shall not be sorry for it.”

“Yes, ma’am,” stammered John, with one of his best bows. That smile, half-coaxing, half-imperious, had captivated far stronger wits than the humble serving-man’s.

“I want you should, as Duke said, deliver this letter only into Miss Holland’s hands, saying simply it is one which you have brought from our house, and requires no



answer. You are to mention nobody's name. You understand me, John?"

"Yes, ma'am; only — only Mr. Duke's orders were, I should say *he* sent the letter."

"Oh, well! That will make no difference. You will obey his orders just the same."

"No, ma'am, if you say it doesn't," — answering her first clause.

"Well, then, it is settled. And further, John, you are never to repeat to Duke, or anybody else, that I have spoken to you regarding this letter. You understand that clearly?" And despite its softness a little menace slipped into her tones.

"Yes, ma'am, I understand," again answered John.

"Well, then, there is no more to be said."

John breathed freer when he got out of that beautiful presence. When he looked at the letter in his hand, he found a five-dollar note wrapped around it.

The amount of her reward for John's services had been a matter of considerable doubt with Edith Walbridge.

She was ready to pay high for them; but the thing which he was to do was really so slight that it was not best to excite his suspicions, by setting so trifling an act at such high value.

John pocketed the money after glancing at it; but he scrutinized the letter long and earnestly. He had, either consciously or unconsciously, examined the address when Duke placed the letter in his hand, and he was familiar with the young man's bold, rapid characters. These were not the same. They were finer and smoother.



Away down in his soul, John did not believe that this was the letter which Duke Walbridge had placed in his hands. When the young lady had turned her back to him as she stood by the table, had she taken up another letter, and was this the one which she had given John, which he now held in his hands, and which he was to deliver to Jessamine Holland?

The coachman tried to ward off these uncomfortable questions. They somehow made him feel he was doing his young master, whom he heartily liked, a great wrong. John need not look far in order to find sophistries that would excuse his conduct to himself.

The business was none of his. He was not certain but the letter was the same, after all. So the man did his part just as Edith had prescribed it for him. It was very little, certainly. He inquired for Miss Holland, and gave the letter into her hands.

But all the way home, it was singular how he dreaded meeting his young master. "You saw Miss Holland, and gave her the letter, as I told you?" asked Duke, coming out to the stable, where John was grooming the horses.

"I saw her, and gave her the letter, sir," answered the man; but he kept on working diligently at the horse, and did not look up, and meet his master's gaze.

An hour afterward, Edith came downstairs, with precisely the same question which her brother had done, and John replied in precisely the same words as before, only he looked the young lady straight in the face.



## CHAPTER XX.

JESSAMINE HOLLAND went up to her room, carrying the letter which John had brought, in a strange flutter of excitement. She did not even look at the address; but if anybody had caught sight of the girl's face he would have seen it tremulous and flushed with some strong feeling.

For Jessamine Holland had a conviction that the letter she carried held her fate, that morning.

She closed her chamber-door, and locked it,— a thing which she had never done since she had entered the household. Then she sat down and covered her face with her hands a moment, her heart throbbed so violently. It was some minutes before that steadied itself enough for her to open the letter calmly, and Jessamine would not do it any other way.

There was a little shock in her face, when her eyes met the handwriting, like that of one who, in the midst of some strong excitement, receives a sudden blow. But she read on to the end. John had only brought her a polite note, requesting Miss Holland's company in a drive that afternoon. Miss Walbridge would call for her, and would not trouble the young lady for a reply. So the letter resolved itself into a mere ceremony, after all. Jes-



samine's feelings, wrought up as they had been, underwent a corresponding reaction.

She did not know what ailed her; she was provoked with herself, thoroughly blue and miserable. Nothing would have relieved her so much as a good cry, but Jessamine was not one of those women who are always melting into showers on the slightest occasion, and she had a secret feeling that giving way to a fit of weeping at this crisis would leave her without a particle of self-respect for the remainder of her days.

The letter from Edith Walbridge had brought her a keen disappointment; but what right had any young woman to expect letters until they came?

"It served her just right; and it was very kind and thoughtful of Miss Edith to invite her out to drive. Of course she would go." So Jessamine reasoned with herself, and managed to clear up her mood a little, and carry her usual calm face down to Mrs. Kent and the lessons; but, for all that, the disappointment clung to her heart, like mist and chill, through the whole morning.

Edith Walbridge went into her room also, and locked the door, — an unusual precaution with that young lady. Then she took up a letter, which had been placed very carefully beneath a small marble Hebe on the table. She looked at it several moments with her face growing stern and gloomy. She lighted a taper, and yet she paused a moment before she touched it to the thing in her hand. Jessamine Holland seemed suddenly to rise before her, the bright, sweet face, the dark, clear eyes, as she had looked when Edith liked her most. At the best, how-



ever, it had only been a doubtful, half liking, which the eldest of the Walbridge daughters felt toward their guest.

What if this Jessamine Holland loved Duke? It would not be a light thing with her, such as it would be with most young girls; but a memory and an anguish — poets and authors wrote of such things — that must abide with her through life.

I think a pang of pity smote the girl's heart for one moment, as she held that little blue, curling taper in her hand. But it was driven out swiftly, as the air drove the flame toward her fingers.

"I counted the cost before I commenced," muttered the girl, "and I have sworn you shall not be my sister, Jessamine Holland." Then she threw the letter on the hearth and touched it to the flame. There was a flash, and the next moment a little brown, shrivelled heap on the hearth. Edith smiled darkly, as she saw it.

"There's your fine love-story, Duke Walbridge, which you fancy your Dulcinea is drinking in now! What a pity it must all be wasted!"

Then she sat down and went over her part for the afternoon again, in order to have it all perfect; and at last concluded that Gertrude had better accompany her on the drive. Her presence would add a certain emphasis of truthfulness to some statements which Edith had been carefully rehearsing for Jessamine Holland's benefit. There was no need that Gertrude should know anything about the letter; and Edith intended to tell her story in such a way that even her younger sister could hardly tell



how much was true, and how much was false; and Gertrude's part would be only a passive one.

Late in the afternoon, the ladies called for Jessamine, and the three were soon bowling along the road in their handsome phaeton. The Walbridge girls had never been in a gayer mood, or more cordial toward herself, than on that afternoon, and Jessamine's spirits were naturally elastic, and the disappointment of the morning had gradually slipped away. She had her full share in the animated talk, and of course there was plenty of it, for the young ladies had not seen each other during the summer.

The Walbridges gave Jessamine amusing descriptions of their season, which the girl enjoyed, and at last — they had been riding for an hour or two — Edith spoke, in such a natural way that even Gertrude, who had been on the look-out for a long time, wondered if the words were really preconcerted on her sister's part.

"There was nobody but our own family in the company, as you know, Miss Jessamine; but we seemed to make a great impression of numbers wherever we stopped. Even the waiters talked about that large party! It was very funny, for I have never considered our family a prodigious one."

"Miss Wheatley was with you, I think you said. She made one more," added Jessamine.

"Oh, yes. But then you know, Miss Jessamine, it has been so long settled that she is one of the family, that I quite forgot to omit her in the enumeration."

"One of the family! I don't think I quite understand," replied Jessamine. There was some curiosity;



but Edith's sharpened ears detected nothing else under the tones.

"Oh, I thought you must know, Miss Jessamine, after being with us all last winter. There has been an engagement between Duke and Margaret Wheatley ever since they were children. You know the intimacy of the two families, and this has strengthened it. That my brother and Margaret are warmly attached to each other does not admit of a doubt; and yet — I am certain I can trust you, Miss Jessamine, with a family secret which has given us of late a good deal of uneasiness — Duke does not seem to show much of a lover's ardor about consummating his marriage. We fancied that it would take place this fall, but it is not likely to come off earlier than next spring. Duke is, as you are aware, Miss Jessamine, the queerest of mortals, and of course there is no need he should be in a hurry; and Margaret, secure in his attachment, is content enough to wait. Nobody would expect Duke Walbridge to do just like other people, even in his courtship, you know, Gertrude."

"Oh, no, of course not," answered the other, in a rapid, acquiescent tone; and that was all Gertrude's share in the matter.

We have all of us heard people whose limbs have been shattered by some terrible blow, relate how at the moment of the stroke they were not conscious of any pain, only a sensation of sudden numbness or paralysis.

Precisely of this sort was Jessamine Holland's feeling. The blow was stunning, but its very force made her calm. Whatever feeling surged beneath her voice, that was



steady enough as it answered, "I never suspected all this, Miss Edith; and yet I can understand it now perfectly. Miss Wheatley must be most welcome to your family."

"Oh, of course, with our long friendship. We never joke Duke about his engagement. He does not like it. That is another of his oddities; so you never heard the matter talked over."

"Yes." And there was no reason she should say anything more.

It was growing dark now, and the phaeton had turned homeward some time ago. Edith had the talk largely to herself, and her spirits seemed to rise as the carriage swept along the smooth roads in the deepening twilight. Jessamine answered promptly enough whenever it was necessary; but she sat very quietly in her corner of the carriage, and Edith had a feeling through all that the girl had had some awful hurt.

It was not precisely a comfortable feeling to have such a companion by her side, and Edith certainly felt a sense of relief when they drove into the Kent grounds, and the quiet figure was lifted out on the veranda. But she played her part well, even to the final adieux.

The carriage had barely turned around before Gertrude commenced. "Why, Edith Walbridge, I had no idea you were going to make a story out of whole cloth like that; neither had mamma, I am sure, or she would never have consented to it."

"What did you expect I was going to do, then?" asked Edith, a little defiantly.



"Why, that you were going to give Miss Holland to understand there was something between Duke and Margaret that — that we hoped would amount to an engagement some day."

"Much good that would have done!" said Edith, contemptuously.

"How you ever got through with it, I can't imagine," added Gertrude. "It was all a story from beginning to end. It would have stuck in my throat."

To tell the truth, Gertrude was a good deal amazed and shocked. An absolute lie was something which Mrs. Walbridge's children had been taught to regard as really wicked, like swearing or stealing.

"'Twas not made out of whole cloth," answered Edith. "Of course I had to stretch things some when I got to talking; but I should like to know if there has not always been a strong attachment betwixt Duke and Margaret, and if we don't all hope and expect they will be married?"

"Well, yes, that is true; but the engagement isn't," added the younger lady, with a new sense of her sister's diplomatic shrewdness, and beginning to feel Edith was not quite so far wrong as at first appeared.

"Well, they ought to be, if they're not. I only intended to anticipate facts a little."

Just then the carriage reached home. After all, Edith had made a good defence of her conduct — to herself, at least.

The Kents had gone out to pass the evening, and would not be home until late. Jessamine Holland re-



remembered that, as she went up to her room, with a sense of relief, through all the dizziness and ache which seemed to have come down upon head and heart.

They brought the baby to her for his good-night kiss, and somebody, she could not tell who, urged her to come down to tea, and she answered she was not well to-night, her head ached; nobody could do her any good; if they would only leave her quite alone, it would pass off.

She seemed to be talking like one in a dream; indeed, the whole world seemed to resolve itself now into something unreal and chaotic, with the exception of that pain at her heart, which grew and grew like a devouring fire.

And so, on brain and heart, the truth pressed home, as though it must kill her, that she loved Duke Walbridge, and that he was lost to her — lost to her this side the grave! Oh, how cool and pleasant its silence and darkness yawned open to her then! She did not wring her hands and cry; she sat still and looked her fate in the face — sat just as still as she used to sit in the corner, when she was a little child, and there was no supper to eat, and she was very hungry; but if she cried, her mother would hear her, and then a hysteric spasm, or a fainting fit, would be likely to follow, and either of these the poor child dreaded more than the hunger. And now the pale, set, wistful face had just the look of that little, hungry, still child's sitting long ago in the corner.

The moon came out, a large, reddish, solitary moon, and looked at her. It used to do that sometimes in the old home, she remembered, and she used to wonder, too,



if it knew and felt sorry for her. She almost wondered that now. There was nobody in the whole world who pitied her. Did God, even, sitting away up in his heaven, — his heaven so happy and so far off? And through all the pain grew and grew like a devouring fire.

It was an awful night to the girl — so awful that it seems almost sacrilege for me to move aside the veil so that you shall look in and see, — a night which she would never forget, even when she should be a gray, wrinkled old woman, — a night whose memory would make her tenderer and softer to all loss that come to young men and maidens; that would make her speak of their sorrows gravely, never joining in common laughter or jest over them, with a feeling that earth held no sorrow, in its freshness, so keen and bitter as that of disappointed love.

She learned then, as she never could have learned in any prosperous courtship, how she loved Duke Walbridge, — what he might be to her through all that future, whose broad horizons reached away and away, as the horizons of life do reach in our youth, — and she must give him up! For the eyes shining out of that white face looked straight at that fact, took in its whole meaning.

Every word which Edith's light, rapid voice had spoken had burned itself into her soul; and there were groups of circumstances to rise up and confirm Miss Walbridge's story. Not that it ever entered into Jessamine's thoughts to doubt it. How could it? But the home intimacy of the two, which she never doubted, say-



ing for one brief interval, had its roots in anything deeper than their boy and girl friendship, now took a new significance in her eyes. In a moment, too, all Duke's conduct toward herself stood out clear in the new light which Edith's words had poured on it. Into the white face there came a sudden flush, and for just a moment the heart of Jessamine Holland throbbed in exultation. She, of all the world alone, knew why Duke was in no hurry to consummate his marriage with the banker's daughter. His manner in the library long ago, and especially all that happened in his last visit, told its own story to her heart. If she had not wholly won the love of Duke Walbridge from his betrothed, Jessamine Holland knew that it was in her power to do it.

But with a swift gesture of horror, she put away this temptation from her, believing it was of the devil. She could see now why Duke had not spoken, and how honor had struggled with some other feeling in their last interview. She shuddered, seeing the brink of that precipice to which it seemed her unconscious hand had led her friend.

The future of Margaret Wheatley was safe in her hands as Olivia's was in Viola's. Before she would have betrayed it, this little Jessamine Holland would have gone and laid down her head with a smile, on the scaffold. He was not hers; he belonged to another. And though it was more than the sweetness of life she put away, and more than the bitterness of death she took to her heart at that moment, sitting under the large, red, solitary moon, God be witness for this girl that she did



not hesitate. She would help Duke Walbridge be true to himself. She loved him too well not to love his honor more than her own happiness.

Whatever there might be in some cases, there was no reason here to justify the breaking of Duke's engagement. Jessamine reasoned calmly now, as though she had nothing at stake; perhaps a little more sternly. She remembered all that Edith had said about the hopes of both families being involved in the engagement, — that young woman had known just the facts most likely to appeal to a generous and sensitive nature, — she remembered her kindly welcome in the household — she remembered all Margaret Wheatley's pleasant ways toward herself. Should they find at last that the stranger they had received in their midst had wrought mischief and misery for them all!

She could die, if it must be, Jessamine thought; but she could not do that other thing.

Yet what a dreadful, bare, empty world it looked to her, — all its lights and hopes blown out with those few careless words. One day, and then another, with nothing worth living for, and that fiery pain eating at her heart, while she must move among people, and talk with them, as though nothing had happened, and to-morrow things would go on just the same as ever, even to Mrs. Kent's lessons.

How long would all this last? she wondered. Until she grew to be an old woman, — an old woman with such a heavy weight of days and nights? Then could she ever learn to meet Duke Walbridge calmly, — ever smile



on him with just the old friendliness, — him, the husband of Margaret Wheatley.

What a live stab came with that thought! She put it away quickly. Then Ross came up to her. She had him still to live for; but even for him her heart hardly stirred now with a live nerve of feeling. She did not know that the young life would come back after a while, — the blow had only paralyzed it now. Then she thought of God, — the Father in heaven, whose heart of love she had trusted through all the pain and penury of her childhood, whose tender care she had believed would never desert her in any dire extremity of life; not even when life failed her, and her eyes grew dim, and her last pulses grew low.

Did he know of this great trouble that had come upon her? Did he know, and was he sorry for her? as she had never doubted his sorrow in the old times of her trouble.

If through this great darkness she could only find his hand, and cling to it, she might stay herself even now — even now!

Something softened in the white set face, and the great, reddish, solitary moon saw the tears quivering at last in the bright, dry eyes.

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“Miss Jessamine,” said Mrs. Kent, bustling into the room just at twilight, “Mr. Walbridge is downstairs. I saw him a moment. Of course, he has asked for you.”

Jessamine gave a little start. Mrs. Kent had surprised her friend on the lounge.



The girl had gone through with her lessons that morning as usual, and had a frolic with the baby. Yet even he felt, as well as his mother, that something was the matter with "Aunt Dess."

She said she was not quite well. And Mrs. Kent, looking in her face, urged her to take a holiday; but Jessamine would not hear of it. Indeed, the girl seemed possessed of a strange, restless, nervous energy, and was inclined to lengthen all the lessons, until Mrs. Kent had to protest.

"I can't see him to-night," answered Jessamine, with a swift, smothered pain in her voice; "I am not feeling well."

It was too soon to meet him calmly, after that awful struggle of the night before. Looking in his face, hearing his voice, the truth would slip into hers, and then he might say — what would undo them both — what he had come so very near saying only two days before.

Once certain that she loved him, Duke Walbridge might make himself believe that Margaret Wheatley's claim was not absolute — might make even Jessamine Holland believe it. She did not dare to trust herself.

"But, Miss Jessamine, it may do you good to see Mr. Walbridge. You look as though you needed something to animate you. Can't you make an effort to come down?" asked Mrs. Kent, a little doubtfully.

"No, thank you. You are very good, dear Mrs. Kent, to come up here with the message. Be, for once a little more so, and carry mine to Mr. Walbridge. I am utterly tired to-night. That is all. I shall be well to-morrow."



So Mrs. Kent went down, still a little in doubt, and delivered Jessamine's message, which she tried to soften all she could, it seeming hardly kind.

"Not well! I did not understand your friend was indisposed, Mrs. Kent?"

"She would not own it this morning, Mr. Walbridge; but I have seen she was not just herself all day."

"And — and this was all Miss Holland's message?"

"This was all. She is very tired; but I think, if you call to-morrow, she will be able to see you," answered the hostess, not feeling quite comfortably.

Something came into the young man's face — something full of pain and bitterness — which Mrs. Kent never forgot. Then he rose up, and was going away, much like a blind man, who is going toward light or air, and he seemed quite unconscious of the lady's presence; but just as he reached the door, he turned, and said, in a hard, dry tone, "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Kent. You are very kind. I hope your friend will be quite well to-morrow. Good-night." And he went out.

Edith Walbridge's plot had worked well.

This was Jessamine Holland's answer! Duke Walbridge had ridden over to the Kents that night, and his heart was a young man's, strong in its first hope and dream of love. Jessamine had read his letter, he thought, the man blushing all alone, in the twilight, like a girl.

And this was her answer!

His horse led him out of the grounds, and took the road home. He might have gone there, or anywhere else, for all his young master knew or cared.



And this was Jessamine's answer !

It might have seemed chill or heartless to some men ; but even in that moment, Duke Walbridge would not accuse her in his inmost thoughts. She had chosen that method of answering him, because it seemed the swiftest and easiest, if the deadliest. She would not see him to give him pain ; would not write him, because no soft, commonplace words, such as women oftenest use, could soothe the bitterness of her No.

It was like her to answer him with silence, and it was best so ! Yet something in her voice, in the very droop of her head yesterday, had given him courage to write that letter.

He groaned out sharply, as the whole scene came up before him, and then he rode on through the darkening night, not knowing nor caring whither, until at last he found himself at the gate of his own home.

After dismounting, Duke Walbridge went to a dark thicket in one corner of the grounds, and threw himself down among the evergreens. The moon, a little larger and redder than last night, and as solitary, stood over him, and she saw the awful anguish of his face ; saw him throw himself down on the damp ground.

Jessamine Holland was a tender maiden, yet she had taken her blow more calmly than the man did his.

He thought how he had loved her, and how she was lost to him, and he felt that his youth was wrecked and his life a failure, which was natural enough if it were not true. She was the woman whom he could love ; he should never find another like her, — there could be no



hope for him; there was but one interpretation of her answer.

He wished he was dead,—wished *that* night Ross had not plunged after him, but that he had gone down, down in the storm and darkness, to sleep there in cool, wide reaches of salt waves, where his grief could never have found him. And there in the wet, chill, black mass of evergreens Duke Walbridge struggled with his fate. Perhaps he thought of God—I cannot tell; but if he did, it was not as Jessamine had done, for a hard, tumultuous, desperate mood possessed him, a mood which only asked, “Why hast thou denied me the prayer of my heart?”

Let us leave him, as we left Jessamine, alone with the awful grief into which it is sacrilege to enter.

It was almost midnight when Duke Walbridge entered his home. Company had kept the family up late, and Mrs. Walbridge and Edith had been anxiously awaiting Duke’s appearance. They knew he had ridden out that evening, and there was little doubt about his destination, and neither of the ladies could await his return without trepidation.

A private interview betwixt Duke and Jessamine Holland might disclose some very ugly facts. Edith had been on the watch to forestall that. She had counted on Duke’s awaiting a reply to his letter, and on his accepting the silence as a denial of his suit. But if Duke saw the young lady, the fact of his having written her a letter, which she had never received, could hardly fail to transpire. Duke was not suspicious; but once hold of the thread, he would not fail to unwind the whole tissue of



falsehoods; and Edith, with all her audacity, could not contemplate the possibility of Duke's discovering her plot without trembling.

Both of the ladies had passed a sufficiently miserable evening. Both saw at the first glance that Duke had learned nothing. But his face had a worn, tired, old look, which went to the heart of his mother.

Mr. Walbridge was nodding in his chair. His son's entrance started him wide awake.

"Father," said Duke, in a dry, mechanical tone, as though he took no interest in the matter, "I've altered my mind about going out West to see that land. I'm ready to start to-morrow." He threw himself into a chair.

At dinner-time he had strongly opposed the whole scheme, — insisted he was not qualified to undertake the business. Then his mother and sister both knew what had wrought this sudden change in Duke's plans.

His father brightened up at the announcement, and commenced a brisk talk; but it was doubtful whether Duke, sitting in the chair, with his tired face, took in one word.

"O my boy!" said his mother, leaning over and laying her hand on his knee, "it will be very hard to part with you. I shall miss you every hour."

Her son looked at the lady, with some secret pain in his eyes, and a glimmer of a smile on his lip, that it hurt her to see.

"Shall you?" he said. "I suppose you do care a little something for me, mother."

"O my boy, I would die for you!" And the mother



in Mrs. Walbridge felt all she said. And if she could have gazed, for one moment, into the cruel anguish she had wrought for those two young souls, not all the wealth of Margaret Wheatley's father could have brought Mrs. Walbridge to carry out the deed at which she had at least connived.

That night Edith and her mother sat up and talked together, until almost morning.

After Duke's departure, Mrs. Kent went upstairs to Jessamine with a perplexed face. Something, plainly, had gone wrong betwixt the two. Remembering the young man's look, the lady was half inclined to be provoked with her friend.

"I delivered your message, Miss Jessamine, but I thought Mr. Walbridge was surprised, and a little hurt."

Jessamine moved restlessly. "I am sorry to give him any pain, but I could not go down to-night."

All the bright elasticity had gone out of her voice — out of her face too. She spoke and looked like one who is worn out with some awful struggle. Mrs. Kent was dreadfully puzzled. The whole thing was more serious than she had imagined.

With an instinct of helpfulness, she resolved to plunge right into the difficulty. "If I did not think you both above such things, I should fancy this a lover's quarrel, Miss Jessamine."

The girl did not so much as blush or smile. She only said, in that dead-live tone of hers, "Duke Walbridge and I will never be anything of that sort to each other."

"I'm not so certain of it," continued the lady, determined



to press matters home now. "The gentleman's look and manner, when he left, were very much like what I fancy a rejected lover's must be."

Jessamine's face winced with a quick pain. She closed her eyes a moment. The words she must speak now would cost her a great pang, but it would be something to have them over, and the sooner Mrs. Kent knew, the better.

"Duke Walbridge is engaged to Margaret Wheatley. I should have told you before, but I did not know it myself."

"Engaged to Margaret Wheatley!" exclaimed Mrs. Kent, in a tone of breathless amazement. "I don't believe one word of it."

"But it is true," answered Jessamine, very decidedly. "His sister told me so. They have known each other ever since they were children, and the engagement has been a very long one."

"His sister told you so!" repeated Mrs. Kent, still incredulous. "Why did he never acknowledge it then? And why has the family kept it secret all this time?"

"Duke never liked to be joked about it, and I suppose he thought it enough that his family and hers understood the relation. I ought to have suspected it myself from the intimacy of the two; but I attributed it to their old friendship."

"It is a very curious affair," said Mrs. Kent, musingly. "I never dreamed of his being Miss Wheatley's lover in the few times I have seen them together. Why



did his sister feel called upon to inform you of the fact at last? ”

“It all came out yesterday during our drive. She took it as a matter of course that I understood long before.”

“It was Miss Edith told you?” still questioned the lady.

“Yes, and Gertrude; at least she assented to all her sister said;” forgetting, for the moment, how the latter had simply listened to the other’s statement, although long afterward Jessamine remembered this.

“If Duke Walbridge loved Miss Wheatley, it was his duty to let you know it. A man with a far less nice sense of honor than he would feel that. If it is an old engagement, as his sister calls it, something is wrong there now, Miss Jessamine. A man who loves a woman as he should, before he marries her, is never afraid or ashamed to confess it.”

There were some scorn and some anger in the lady’s voice. Her feeling for her friend was strong, and she would have said more than that, had she not glanced at Jessamine’s face. The words that blamed Duke Walbridge stabbed Jessamine, though they were spoken for her sake.

“Mrs. Kent,” she said, solemnly, with a feeling that she could not wisely withhold the truth now, “if, as his sister said, Duke Walbridge has shown, of late, no eagerness for his marriage, and if his engagement was entered into long ago, still the heart of one woman and the happiness of two families are involved in it. Margaret and



he belong to each other. No one has any right to come between them."

Mrs. Kent knew then what Jessamine meant, and why she had refused to see Duke Walbridge. She knew, too, what stuff Jessamine Holland was made of, and that whatever power was in the girl's hands, and whatever it might cost her, she would help Duke Walbridge to be true to himself and to Margaret Wheatley!

Mrs. Kent looked at the face lying among the crimson cushions of the lounge, like a child's face, worn and old with sorrow. The sight made her heart ache. Yet she showed her native delicacy by not speaking one word. She went over and took the tired face in her lap, and kissed it.

It was a little act; but you know sometimes what little acts are worth. In all her life to come, Jessamine would never forget that one.

The two women understood each other.



## CHAPTER XXI.

DUKE WALBRIDGE, on his way to the West, stopped in New York. He intended to remain only a single day and night. A strange, morbid restlessness possessed him. The wider the distance betwixt him and that which had made alike "the keenest joy and the bitterest agony of his life," the better it seemed for him.

There was nothing in New York to interest him in his present mood. The streets, the hurrying crowds, the glare of light, all that passed before him seemed like one vast, miserable farce.

What a wretched Vanity Fair this world was, and what fools made up the show!" Was it worth the gunpowder, the plumes, the shouting, and the lights? Well, it would be over soon, that was one comfort; and then poor Antonio's words drifted across his sullen thoughts, and hardly helped to make them better: —

"A stage where every man must play his part,  
And mine a sad one."

It was a dark hour with Duke Walbridge. All his old faith, all his high resolves, went down into a grave darker and deeper than the grave where his heart had gone.



I suppose no man could be refused by the woman whom he had loved generously and absolutely, and not go through much what this one did. I suppose, too, that any man who had not something weak and flaccid at bottom would rally sooner or later, not letting a woman's "No" blight his life. Still, the times when some dreadful blow seems to have swept off our faith and hope are dangerous for all of us. More so, probably, for men than women.

A great temptation was coming, silent and swift, toward Duke Walbridge. In the evening he called to see Margaret Wheatley. He had promised his family to do this, and brought various messages from home. Then the sight of a friendly face, particularly so fair a face as that of Margaret Wheatley's, could not be unpleasant to him.

The banker's daughter welcomed him in her sweetest way. He took her quite by surprise; and it was natural enough she should suspect that her charms had been the lodestone which had drawn him to the city.

Indeed, Margaret Wheatley sometimes wondered within herself whether that odd, fascinating Duke Walbridge had not been, like the knight in the old story, —

"Signed with a spell,"

which made him proof to the charms of all women. A tithe of the attention which she had lavished on that young man would have vanquished any other, Margaret solemnly believed; and this girl had been used to having whatever she wanted. Her pride was a little piqued, and the prize was doubly enhanced in value; because Marga-



ret Wheatley, with all her charms, was in her secret soul a little uncertain whether she could secure it.

She was in her most fascinating mood to-night, bright and soft, and her talk took away something from her companion's darkness and pain. She always amused him, and the two always found plenty to say to each other.

Duke had never liked Margaret quite so well as he did to-night, and he gave himself up to whatever power she possessed over him. In all their friendship, unrestrained as it had been, Duke Walbridge had always borne himself toward Margaret Wheatley for simply what he was, her intimate friend from boyhood. No subtle tenderness of tone or look had ever given her cause to suspect that a lover's partiality lay beneath them.

Duke Walbridge had so much grace in him that he would never descend to a flirtation with any woman. I use the word in its essential meaning, and not in that light, conventional one which expresses merely the social relations, the brightness, the frolic and mirth which are a part of the life of young men and women — natural and harmless. Duke Walbridge meant something different from that, and knew what he meant.

“That flirting in a woman was bad enough,” he always insisted to his sisters; “but it was worse in a man, because his position made him in some sense ‘master of the situation.’”

He knew, too, all the fascination there was in that kind of game. But long before he had ever met Jessamine Holland, Duke Walbridge had settled with himself that



his record should be as pure as he should wish that of the woman's whom he would ask to be his wife.

He had kept faith with himself through the strong temptations which, in his family atmosphere, must be certain to fall in his way.

He held there was hardly anything more cruel and base than to imply, by all the nameless language of look and speech, that a man felt a tender regard for a woman whom he had no thought of asking to be his wife, knowing all the time that he was awaking some interest and hope to which he could never respond.

"It was almost the meanest and cruelest wrong a fellow could do," he used to say, when some circumstance brought up the matter at home; "because he knew there was no redress; knew that he was perfectly safe, for no woman had any real claim on a man before he had fairly proposed to her.

"Of course, any woman was fortunate to be deserted by such a coward and a sneak; but that fact did not save him from falling as much below the level of pickpockets, as a woman's heart was of more value than her purse." That was the way Duke Walbridge talked; and all this with a great deal else, plentifully seasoned with praise, and laughter at his odd notions, had been duly reported to Margaret Wheatley by Duke's sisters.

She did not like him the less. Do you think any woman would?

So that night the young man sat in the banker's splendid parlors, and the daughter sat at his side, — sat there with her bright, delicate, high-bred face, with all her native



charm of manner, set off by those fine touches of social art, which add a crowning grace to the most attractive woman.

Duke could not help looking at her, admiring her; and as she smiled and talked, other thoughts came to him.

He had staked all, and lost, — God only knew what the loss had been; but was not here at his side the woman whom, next to Jessamine Holland, he liked best in the world?

He thought of his family, and how great a delight it would be to them to learn at last that their long hopes about him and Margaret were consummated.

Was there anything better than this in life for him? Jessamine Holland had failed him. The fine sympathy, the high ideals, had gone with her. Perhaps he had been a romantic fool to expect them in any woman; it seemed, that when he called, there had been no echoing response in her soul, only silence.

Was not Edith partly right after all, and his mother too? He had sought what he believed the highest good, and now, at least, if the lower fell to his share, had he not a right to take it?

Tortures might not have wrung a confession from Duke Walbridge, but in his soul he had no very serious doubt as to how his suit with Margaret Wheatley would prosper. All this in his thoughts, his manner slightly changed toward her. There was something in it which she had never felt before. In a little while, the young man came to questioning with himself whether he should be doing any harm to ask Margaret Wheatley if she would be his wife? It was true he preferred another woman before her, but that



woman could never be anything but a bitter memory to him. He liked his old playfellow. As for loving this one, — well, he could do that enough to make her satisfied and happy. What more was needed ?

Duke Walbridge was just in the mood to make a desperate plunge into something new ; the hard, material side of things had the advantage just then.

And Margaret smiled and sparkled by his side.

“It is wholly absurd, Duke, your starting off West to-morrow ;” for she had at last found what had brought him to the city. “Don’t be quite so parsimonious of yourself. Give us at least one day in town.”

“Thank you, Margaret, I’m not in a bright mood. You would only be dreadfully moped before the day was out, were I to be cruel enough to take you at your word, and remain.”

“Not in a bright mood ? I always liked you best in your glum ones, when you were a boy, for you were certain to say so many witty, bright things, which kept me laughing and wondering at you. Ah ! Duke, what an odd little fellow you were !”

“Was I ? They say at home, I am an odd big fellow now, you know.”

Margaret laughed gayly. “It’s as true now as then.”

“Yes, you liked me a little then, — at least you told me so ;” and he looked at her with some grateful warmth in his eyes.

“I did ? I am astonished at myself. It was highly improper to do so.”

“I never thought of that. But it is quite too late to



be prudish over it now. You not only said it, but wrote it to me, in a most charming little letter, the week after you left us."

"How you shock me, Duke, bringing me face to face with such youthful follies! I had no idea I had said so much to any of your sex, except papa."

"I can prove it to you; I have the little note-paper on which 'tis writ,' among my childish treasures. The edges are grown a little yellow with time."

"You have, Duke? I am flattered that you should have cared to preserve such nonsense."

This talk was dangerous ground; and the young girl, sitting there in her youth and fairness, was dangerous to the eyes and soul of Duke Walbridge.

"I was the one who was flattered, Margaret. Did you think the paper which told me that you cared for me was of so little consequence that I should destroy it?"

"Of course I did. But I should really like to see that old, childish scrawl of mine, ashamed, as I ought to be, of my imprudence."

"I am sorry to hear you accuse your own pretty ingenuousness; but you shall certainly see the letter the next time you come to us, for I do not intend it shall go out of my possession, unless —" Had he finished the clause it must have sealed the fate of Duke Walbridge. He happened to catch sight of the white hand, with its sparkle of gems, which lay in her lap, and he laid his hand on it with some tender gallantry, and said: —

"'In faith 'twas a fair hand;  
And whiter than the paper it writ on  
Was the fair hand that writ.'"



It would be interesting to know how many lovers have quoted Lorenzo's saying, since he first made it, of his "beautiful Jewess."

With a man like Duke Walbridge, however, this meant something. He had not gone so far without intending to go farther. There was a little pause. A glow came into Margaret's cheek, used as she was to that sort of talk from men. A moment longer, and Duke Walbridge would have come out abruptly with the question he had fully made up his mind now to ask her.

At that moment they heard the voice of Margaret's father, in the hall. "We've got hold of the thief, then?" he said, in loud tones.

"Yes, sir, we've bagged him," somebody's gruff voice replied.

"Oh, I'm glad to hear that!" exclaimed Margaret.

Duke turned toward her for an explanation. She went on rapidly. "Papa found out the other day that one of the under-clerks had been forging a number of small checks on the house. The whole sum did not probably amount to five hundred dollars; but papa was very earnest to ferret the whole thing out, as he always is in such cases. I am glad the rogue is where he will have no further chances for mischief."

"Was he a young man?" inquired Duke.

"Yes; a mere boy, under twenty. These were probably his first offences. Papa says he would have trusted him with uncounted gold a year and a half ago, when he came up straight from the country; but the city proved too much for him. It does, in nine cases out of ten,



with that class, I believe. The youth fell into bad company and extravagant habits — and there's the end of him."

"Poor fellow! how pitiful it is, Margaret, that he should wreck his life at the very threshold in that way! I don't doubt, too, but there is some heart of mother or sister at home to break over his fall."

"Yes," answered Margaret, "I know it is very bad; but these things are always happening. The papers are full of them, you know. If people won't take care of themselves, and do what is right, they must abide by the consequences. I am glad papa has caught this rogue. He set two shrewd policemen on the scent. That must have been one to whom he spoke just now in the hall."

The light, smooth voice! Margaret spoke with less real interest than she would have manifested over the broken leg of her canary. But the words, slipping down the smooth voice, grated on the ear of Duke Walbridge. Ice was smooth too; but was it harder and colder than the girl's pity? he thought. Where was her human heart, that she could speak in that light, careless way, of a young life wrecked; of a boy's soul, pure and honest only such a little while ago, and gone down so early into crime and shame? The words might be excused, perhaps, but the careless tones, never. They brought up, in a moment, all the sharp antagonisms of their inmost souls. Duke saw it clearly. Margaret Wheatley and he might be husband and wife, but between their two souls there could never be intimacy and oneness.

It was a very small hinge; but Margaret Wheatley



did not know her whole fate had turned on it. It did seem to her that there was some subtle change in Duke's manner; or, at least, that he went back into just the Duke Walbridge she had always known; talking in his free, pleasant, self-possessed way. In a little while her father and aunt came in; but all their united energies could not prevail upon their guest to remain in the city over another day.

Duke was a stronger, happier man, when he started for the hotel that night. Some dark and doubt had cleared off from his soul. He looked up at the stars, and he felt once more that the eternal God was over them.

He began to see, too, that there must be something unsound at bottom of that man's character, who would feel that his life had failed because of any woman's nay. If he could not live worthily without her, he was not worthy of winning her.

So the hope and strength of his youth came into Duke Walbridge's soul once more. Yet how very near he had come at one time to committing himself! Indeed, he felt a little uncomfortably, recalling two or three speeches he had made; but his honor was quite safe.

"I wish it could have been different, Margaret, old playfellow," he murmured to himself; "but it was not my fault. We could never have understood each other."

As for Margaret Wheatley, she went to her room that night chagrined and disappointed. She had thought at one time that Duke Walbridge's manner meant something. She must have fancied him more than she did



any other man, for she sat down and actually had a real cry to herself. It was the first, it would be the last, one for his sake; but, for all that, her tears had some bitterness in them. Then pride and pique came to her aid.

To think that she, Margaret Wheatley, with all her charms, with hosts of lovers in her train, could really be had for the asking, could condescend to care for that odd, incomprehensible Duke Walbridge! She would never think of him again, for he was not worth it.

Her pride, too, took the alarm, for Margaret Wheatley had not been a whole season in the Walbridge society, without discovering where their tastes inclined. Perhaps Duke knew this as well as herself. The very thought made hot flushes in her face.

The banker's daughter began seriously to question with herself whether there was one among all her suitors whom she really fancied.



## CHAPTER XXII.

SIX months had passed away, and then there came sudden news from Ross Holland. He was about coming home.

If the fact must be told, his sister needed something of just this sort to rouse her up into new animation and energy. Not that she was dull or melancholy. She went through all her daily duties, she was occupied from morning until night; but Mrs. Kent, who watched her narrowly, saw something nobody else did behind all the energy. She was a hard taskmaster to herself these days, this brave little Jessamine.

Her activity seldom flagged, otherwise thoughts and memories would drift in, and a dreadful haunting ache behind them. So she kept at work; and no doubt it was best for her to do this, though her cheeks lost some of their roundness, and there was a grieved, tired look about her mouth at times, which a homeless lost child might have worn, and which must have touched anybody who loved her.

All this time, Mrs. Kent displayed the delicate care and consideration of a tender sister, devising a thousand ways to interest the girl, and to restrain her from over-



exertion. A great blow has fallen on her, but Jessamine thinks nowhere in the world could it have been so much softened as under the roof-tree of Richard Kent.

It is strange that Duke Walbridge did not come to say good-by, and still more singular that he has not written one word since he went away so abruptly. Jessamine supposes that she has the clue to his silence, and it is a relief that he does not write.

Mrs. Kent, though she never alluded to the matter, pondered the young man's conduct a good deal. It puzzled the little woman's bright wits. Of course it was not possible to doubt his engagement with Margaret Wheatley, after two of his sisters had asserted it. Yet there was something inexplicable in his conduct, which hardly seemed in keeping with the young man's character.

But Jessamine seemed now quite roused into her old self with the tidings from the Indies. The brother whom she had not seen for five years was coming back to her, and so long as Ross lived she would have something to live for. She talked of little else for days together, and it seemed to her that her heart — the heart that had never beat quite strong and steady since one dreadful night — needed him now more than ever.

When he came, she should try to forget there was anybody else in the world; although it would come very hard to hear him go on about his friend, as he would be sure to do, and to have to answer his questions. For the first time in her life, she must have a real secret from Ross. Well, one couldn't live in this world without having some things to bear silently.



A sudden wind of good fortune had blown upon Ross Holland. I suppose the sum which in his own eyes and his sister's was to make his worldly prosperity would have seemed absurdly small to most people of very moderate means.

Ross had cleared ten thousand dollars for his share, in some fortunate commercial speculations, which had opened to him through a very wealthy English house in Calcutta; and he had, in the management of the whole matter, evinced such practical business skill and foresight, that the heads of his own firm concluded to offer him a clerkship in their branch house, in New York.

The young man's engagement did not exceed a couple of years, although it would no doubt be renewed at the end of that time, if it was not regarded best for him to come out again to India; he was to receive a salary, which, with economy, would furnish the comforts and some of the graces of life to himself and Jessamine.

So, after those five years in that strange, sleepy, gorgeous land, with its melancholy, and mystery, and beauty, — five years, panting slowly through their dead heats, making a man of him, as they had made a woman of Jessamine, — Ross was coming home.

Well, money is a good thing. There was a fair prospect now, that Jessamine would have her cottage, with its half-dozen rooms, and its one veranda, and its bits of balconies, — a little brown cage, hung up a few miles from the city, in some greenery of shrubs.

“You could set the whole thing in your drawing-room, Mrs. Kent,” said Jessamine, with her old, pleased, arch



laugh, to that lady, for the latter went into the subject with her whole heart ; and the two spent a great many hours in devising the appointments of every room, and the grieved look about Jessamine's mouth grew fainter, and the voices of her childhood, the hopes and the dreams, sang once more in her heart, softer and slower it is true —

“ As though remembering she had wept.”

One day Mrs. Kent walked into the room where Jessamine sat, intent on a cap she was making for Ross. The lady walked first to the window. Outside there was a grieving of winds, a drifting of snows, and heaps of wild, desolate clouds over all.

Mrs. Kent shivered a little, and then took up the previous day's paper which happened to lie in her work-basket. Running over the columns, she stopped suddenly, drew her breath quickly : her strained eyes devoured some paragraph, and a little low cry broke from her lips.

“ Did you speak to me ? ” asked Jessamine, absorbed in contemplating the effect of her work.

“ I — no — I believe not.”

Even then, Jessamine did not observe the singular tone. She was not facing the window where Mrs. Kent stood, with the paper in her hand, looking at the drooping, shining head, with strained eyes, full of horror.

At last, the silence must have struck Jessamine. She turned around, and met her friend's stare, before the latter could move away.

“ Why, what is the matter ? Has anything happened ? ” asked the girl, startled at that look.



"No — yes — I believe so. Don't ask me, Miss Jessamine;" a spasm of pain in her voice.

Jessamine was terrified. Something awful had happened, but she had still no suspicion that it concerned her. The work dropped from her hands. She rose and went straight to Mrs. Kent, and laid her hand on the lady's arm.

"Whatever it is, I am your friend. Tell me," she said.

Then the lady, with the wide horror still in her eyes, groaned out, "I cannot — I cannot — Miss Jessamine, lest it kill you!"

"Me!" A pallor, coming swift as lightning into her face. "Does it concern me, Mrs. Kent?"

The lady was dumb.

Then Jessamine's fears leaped at once to the truth, — "And Ross — oh! some harm has come to him!"

As she spoke, and before Mrs. Kent could reply, the girl caught sight of the paper. Springing forward, she tore it out of the lady's unwilling hands. Her eyes went straight to the fatal paragraph. They gathered out its significance in a moment: —

"The 'Nestor,' an East-Indiaman, heavily laden, had sailed from Calcutta, bound to Liverpool, on the fourteenth ult. She had encountered in the Indian Ocean one of the most terrible gales within the memory of men now living. The stanch old steamer, which had ridden out many a tropical storm, had gone to pieces at last. Not one of her passengers had been saved. A few of the crew had got off



in a raft, and reached the shore, to tell the fate of the lost vessel."

It was in the *Nestor*, bound from Calcutta to Liverpool, that Ross Holland was to sail on the fourteenth ult.

Jessamine stood still a moment with her rigid face and her glaring eyes turned on her friend, while the truth entered slowly into brain and heart. The she put up her hands, and a slow cry welled out of her lips, — a slow, wailing cry, as though her youth and hope, and all that there was to desire in life, went down in it. "O my God! I am all alone in thy world — all alone!" and with that cry she dropped at Mrs. Kent's feet.



## CHAPTER XXIII.

A MONTH has come and gone, and Jessamine Holland is alive still. There was no danger that she would die from the beginning. There was too much strong, young life in her to go out under any swift blow of sorrow.

It is true that Mrs. Kent did not reason in that way. She saw her friend's face grow sharper and older each day, while no tears, no strong emotion of any sort, seemed to break up its dead, white calm. She looked, as faces do, when the hearts under them are broken. After the first week, during which the girl was too ill to leave her room, Mrs. Kent, who kept insisting that something must be done, sent, without consulting anybody, for Hannah Bray.

The honest, faithful soul came at once. Mrs. Kent took her upstairs without acquainting Jessamine of the arrival. "O my poor baby!" Mrs. Bray burst out, as soon as she crossed the door-sill, and caught a glimpse of the white, young, hopeless face on the pillow.

The familiar voice, the homely, kindly face, the very words she had heard so often, broke up the dead calm at last.

The old home, the dreamy father, the anxious mother, the boy brother, — all rushed, like the rushing of mighty winds upon Jessamine's soul. She put out her arms, just



as she had often done when she was a baby; and Hannah Bray took the girl in her arms, just as she had done then, and after long waiting, the agony of sobs and tears, which Jessamine's heart had carried all this time, poured itself forth on the old, faithful bosom.

"It will kill her — it certainly will!" said poor, frightened Mrs. Kent, crying like a child herself.

"No, it won't; it will do her good in the end," sobbed Hannah Bray.

And it did. Jessamine slept that night the sound, dreamless sleep of overwrought soul and body; and when she awoke in the morning, there was the old, dear, homely face at her pillow, working and smiling betwixt tenderness and pity, and a little ghost of a smile came out on Jessamine's lips.

They brought the baby to her, and he looked, with his blue, wondering eyes, into "Aunt Dess'" face, finding something there which he could not understand; and then he laid down his fresh, dewy cheek on hers, and the touch entered into her heart and comforted her. For a while it seemed to Jessamine she could see nothing but that black sky, hear nothing but the shrieks of the wind through the cordage, and the thunder of those black, swirling waves, into which the dear face went down; but very softly, little by little, other sights and sounds came to take their places.

It is true, she was all alone in the world; but it was God's world, after all; and the heaven where her household was gathered was his also. One day she expected to find them there. The desolate, empty years were before



her, the lonely, tired, aching heart, if God so willed, to carry across them; and thinking this, she would turn away her head and cry slowly to herself with the awful sounding of those distant seas, under which, somewhere, the dear head was lying so low.

But it was something that now she asked every day for the baby, and asked Hannah Bray, too, all kinds of questions about her home, and the tow-headed children there.

Then, what a friend Mrs. Kent was! "You shall have a home with us as long as you live," said the generous little woman; "and when we get quite insufferable, we will let you off for a little while, to go up and see Hannah Bray. But, mind, we shall be after you if you stay long."

Her husband, too, was so thoughtful and sympathetic, that Jessamine, in her gratitude, thought she had never fully appreciated the man before. It is true, the sympathy of Richard Kent took that practical shape which was the man's habit, and which Jessamine specially stood in need of. He ascertained at once, from the branch of the East India house in New York, whether the ten thousand dollars were secure from all mischance; and when he learned that the brother's death in no wise affected his fortune, he set about having it well secured to Jessamine, and promised her to invest it where it would bring fat dividends, — "twelve per cent. at the smallest, child."

So Jessamine had her fortune at last, and Ross had paid his life to find it! Still, his sister knew that in the last hour, when the young soul gazed death in the face, he had remembered with a flash of joy that he should not



leave his sister helpless and dependent in the world. All this was proved by the care he had taken, before he sailed from Calcutta, to secure his fortune to her in case any mischance befell him. And Mr. Kent, having had ample proofs of this foresight when he visited the branch house in New York, returned loud in the young man's praises.

"The whole thing did honor to his head and heart," he told Jessamine; and it was sweet, and sad too, to remember that all the comfort and ease of her future would be the gift of that dead brother.

She was independent now; and though she should never sit under the little roof-tree of the cottage that was to be Ross' and hers, she did find a live thrill of pleasure in devising improvements for Hannah Bray's house. The woman should have the new bedroom on which she had set her heart so long, and the little shabby parlor should be refurnished.

• No, Jessamine was not dead yet. Of course the sad tidings had made a great sensation at the Walbridges. Eva had cried herself sick over it, and there was not one of the household who did not think with pity of Jessamine, although this feeling in the case of a few was mingled with some other emotions anything but pleasant.

Edith's plans had worked well thus far. It was best that her brother should be allowed a little time to get over the pain of his disappointment. His letters were all she could desire, odd and playful and hearty.

It was true that he seemed in no haste to return home. "The wide, free, glorious life out there," he insisted,



“was grand as the horizon ; the savage in him relished it ; and a buffalo-skin and a wigwam were the only essentials of life. The rest was pretty much all sham and humbug.”

The family laughed ; but Edith began to feel it was high time for Duke to return home. Her masterpiece of intrigue must be followed up by another. Indeed, it had been her plan from the beginning to manage matters so that Duke should be precipitated into an engagement with Margaret Wheatley. If it took place at all, she reasoned, it must be done hastily, and on his part half desperately.

But, once done, she knew her brother too well to believe that he would allow himself to regret his proposal. Whatever he might fancy he found wanting in Margaret Wheatley, he would deem it disloyalty and wrong to her not to attempt to make the best of his own act.

“If I could only once get him committed in some way,” said Edith to herself.

That she calculated shrewdly, the facts had proved. One moment only had stood betwixt Duke Walbridge and Margaret Wheatley. But Edith did not know that. “Duke must be got home by one means, as he had been got off by another,” his sister reasoned.

She made up her mind to go to New York for a while. And it was an easy matter to convince Mr. Walbridge that he was not as well as usual that winter, and absolutely required his son in the city to transact some important business at this juncture.

So pa's health was made the argument to induce Duke to return to New York. The latter had made up his



mind to pass the winter in the territories, and no weaker reason would have availed to bring him home.

Mrs. Walbridge was haunted all day by thoughts of a young, hopeless face, which seemed to look at her with something reproachful in its eyes; and one night she dreamed that the girl's mother stood by her bedside, and asked in solemn, plaintive tones, "What have you done to my poor little motherless girl?"

Mrs. Walbridge woke up in a great tremor, and was not herself all the next day.

It was a most unpleasant duty to call on Jessamine Holland; but Mrs. Walbridge braced herself to do it at once. It was before Hannah Bray's arrival; and that week the doctor had insisted on Jessamine's being kept free from all agitation, so the lady did not see Jessamine.

But Mrs. Walbridge did her part well. Every day she sent inquiries and kind messages with her younger daughters; also choice bouquets and delicacies.

Gertrude was out of town at this time, and Edith always had some excellent excuse for delaying her call until next day. What wonder that she shrank from meeting the eyes of Jessamine Holland?

In the remote part of the territory where Duke was the mails were irregular, and Edith took good care to detain the letter which published the loss of the steamer in which Ross Holland had sailed. Not that she could really see how Duke's knowledge of his friend's death would materially affect her plans. It might, indeed, promote them. If her brother should conceive it his duty to have an interview with Miss Holland on his return, the recent



sorrow would be likely to preoccupy both, and no dangerous topics would then be opened between them.

Still, a little doubtful, she not only detained the paper, but prevailed upon her mother to forbid Eva's acquainting her brother with his loss, which the child, full of ardent sympathy, was on the eve of doing. At last, however, Mrs. Walbridge insisted that her son should no longer be kept in ignorance of what concerned him so deeply, and Edith assented with a tolerable grace.

"Perhaps mamma was right," she reasoned. "The truth would have to come out some time, and any longer suppression of it might, in the end, raise some rather uncomfortable questions."

The tidings found Duke Walbridge looking forward most reluctantly to the necessity of returning home, which every letter seemed to make more imperative. That broad, free, strong life of the prairies had braced anew the sinews of his soul. The spirit of those grand, solemn horizons had entered into him. If they had not healed his disappointment, they had made him brave to bear it, and the active, material, wrestling life was just now what was needed for a temperament with a strong, natural bias toward a dreamy, æsthetic indolence.

The news of Ross Holland's death fairly stunned his friend at the first. When he rallied from the blow, his thought went straight to the sister in her grief and loneliness, and to his last solemn pledge to Ross.

Her rejection of himself had not cancelled that bond. In all its binding force it lay upon his soul now, — now that the brave young head lay in the stillness of those far-



off Eastern seas. There had been none standing by to plunge in and rescue him in the tumult and the darkness, as once he had plunged in to save another.

And must he go back and look in Jessamine Holland's face, and touch her hand, and hear her voice?

Across the years rose the memory of that awful night on the Sound; across the years stole the words he had spoken: "You may trust me. I will be a brother to her." And Ross must have thought of them when he went down that night.

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"Miss Holland, a gentleman has called to see you," said the servant, at the door of Mrs. Kent's sitting-room, to which Jessamine had come down for the first time since her illness. About this, there had been nothing dangerous; only a kind of slow, nervous fever had prostrated her.

There was quite a family group around the girl reclining on the lounge. Mrs. Kent and Hannah Bray were there with the baby.

Jessamine had a vague hope that somebody from the Indies, or from the lost ship, would search her out some time with tidings of her lost brother. So she said very earnestly, "If you will allow him to come up here, Mrs. Kent?"

"O child, you're not able to bear the sight of company," put in Hannah Bray.

But Jessamine insisted, and it was the habit of the house to indulge her. Mrs. Kent of course assented, and the gentleman was shown up.



Duke Walbridge came forward, and as Jessamine turned and looked at him, and he caught sight of the white, sharpened face, a cry broke out of his lips: "O Jessamine!" and he took both her hands, everything else swallowed up that moment in the thought of her sorrow and his own.

And the depth of her grief made her almost calm to meet this man. Her face quivered, it is true, and for a while neither could speak, and Mrs. Kent and Hannah Bray went out, leaving them alone to talk of their dead together.

"It was very good of you to come, Mr. Walbridge," said Jessamine, looking at him with her dark eyes, which seemed to have grown so much larger and sadder.

"I started the day after I learned. The paper containing the account never reached me; and my family hesitated to write, dreading to inflict the blow."

"And because of that you came all this way, Mr. Walbridge?"

"Certainly. If you have forgotten what I promised *him* on our last meeting, I could not."

She forgot then that she was talking to the betrothed husband of Margaret Wheatley; she only remembered that he was Ross' friend and her own, and she put her hand in his, in the old way that he remembered.

"No; I have not forgotten," she said.

Hannah Bray was quite too doubtful of the effect of any strong emotion on Jessamine to leave the girl and her friend long together. Mrs. Kent, who was strongly drawn toward the faithful, honest heart under the homely,



faded face, always yielded to Hannah's experience and judgment. So the woman stole back in a little while; and after she had been introduced to Mr. Walbridge, the talk was carried on mostly betwixt the man and the elder woman. Hannah's heart and tongue were full of Ross these days.

Meantime, Mrs. Kent, downstairs, was holding a solemn parley with herself. She was a resolute little woman, and she had watched Duke Walbridge breathlessly when he came forward to meet Jessamine. The feeling that leaped into his eyes with their first glance, was one to which the lover of Margaret Wheatley had no right.

The lady felt an inexplicable hankering to allude to the fact of his betrothal to the young man's face. It was a delicate thing to do this, as the matter had been kept so profound a secret, and the lady herself was pledged not to divulge it. But it was not revealing the man's secret to speak of it to himself.

"If I only had a chance, and it would come in naturally," she mused. And at last she heard Duke Walbridge steps on the stairs, and went into the drawing-room, where she would be certain to meet him.

His face brightened as he saw the lady, and after a cordial greeting he sat down and commenced talking of Jessamine.

He was quite overwhelmed at her appearance, and was full of eager questions about her; and Mrs. Kent went over the sad story of the day when the woful tidings reached them.



“Poor Ross! He was my best friend. I loved him as I did my own life. He came near losing his once for mine. I shall never have another friend like him.” The tears in his eyes, and in Mrs. Kent’s too. “If there is anything I can do for Miss Holland, I beg you will give me that mournful satisfaction. I promised Ross, just as we separated, that if any harm befell him, I should stand always in his stead to his sister. I shall hold that promise sacred to the last hour of my life.”

“She has so few friends, — poor, lonely, heart-broken child!” murmured Mrs. Kent. “She would be very grateful to hear you say that, Mr. Walbridge.”

“Grateful!” There was a sting of mournfulness or bitterness in his voice, which struck Mrs. Kent. “She can never have any cause for that feeling toward me. I owe it to her brother that I am alive to-day.” And again Duke Walbridge added — “Poor Ross!”

Mrs. Kent was no female Machiavel, but she was not without the tact of her sex. If she could only find some by-path to the subject which perplexed her.

Duke’s next remark opened one. “My family, out of mistaken kindness, delayed the blow as long as possible; and then, although I was on the lookout, as my friend had written me in what steamer he should take passage for Liverpool, the paper containing the shipwreck of the *Nestor* miscarried. But you may be certain I made all possible haste in returning. I did not even stop over one train in New York last evening, to see my sister Edith, but hurried across the city.”

Mrs. Kent stumbled desperately into the opening here



afforded her, not certain whether doing so was in good taste, but she resolved to venture.

“You were very kind, but I almost fear, Mr. Walbridge, that a lady who has better claims on you than even your sister will feel herself neglected.”

The young man stared amazed at his hostess. He had, what his sisters regarded, a sublime contempt for gossip, and was usually invulnerable to all that light skirmishing of hints and jests, which affords so much pretty, foolish amusement.

Such a cool broadside as Mrs. Kent's, however, could not but amaze him a little.

“I assure you, Mrs. Kent, you are entirely mistaken. No such lady, so far as I am aware, exists.”

It was hardly the time for jests, but Mrs. Kent was not the woman to pause now.

“O Mr. Walbridge!” — with that little laugh, and toss of the head, which her husband thought the most charming thing in the world, and which certainly was very attractive in its way, — “what a fine actor was spoiled when you turned — I cannot precisely say what. You really look so innocent, that I should be imposed upon, if my information were not derived from a source which places the matter beyond a doubt.”

Some foolish gossip evidently had been busy with his name; still it was best now to set the lady right.

“Mrs. Kent, I think you believe me a man of my word, and that I should scorn to deny an imputation of the sort you have made, if there were one particle of truth in it; but I assure you, on my honor, that I have



not the faintest idea of what you mean, or to what lady you allude."

It was impossible to believe that Duke Walbridge did not mean what he said; indeed, it would have been simply an insult to imply any farther doubt of his sincerity.

Mrs. Kent's heart half choked her; but she had determined now that Duke Walbridge should not leave her house until she had reached the bottom of this mystery.

"I can only say, Mr. Walbridge, that you utterly confound me, for I had the story of your engagement from Miss Jessamine."

"The story of my engagement from Miss Jessamine?" repeating each word slowly, like a man half-dazed, trying to take in the meaning. "Did she believe it?"

"How could she help it, when she had the whole from the lips of your own sisters?"

He started then. His breath came quickly.

"Do you mean to say, Mrs. Kent — do I understand you —" Duke paused a moment, trying to steady his thoughts. "Forgive me, my dear madam. You have so confounded me, that I am at a loss for words."

"I assure you, Mr. Walbridge, you are not a more astonished man than I am woman, at this moment."

A pause; then young Walbridge drew his chair nearer the lady. "Will you be my friend, Mrs. Kent; will you answer my next questions?"

"If I can, Mr. Walbridge;" replying only to half of his.

"To whom did my sisters say I was engaged?"

"To Miss Margaret Wheatley."



She felt him start, and she fancied he grew paler about the lips.

“Which of my sisters told her so?”

“Miss Edith, I am certain, though Miss Gertrude was present, and assented to all.”

“When was it, and where?”

“On a ride they took together not more than two days before you went away. Miss Jessamine, I am certain, never suspected this before, but your sisters stated that the engagement had been a long one, and your extreme distaste to having such a subject a matter of common gossip had confined the knowledge to your own family.”

“And you say Miss Holland believed this?” he again inquired.

“Mr. Walbridge, it was the explicit statement of your sisters; there was no room left to doubt.”

Duke Walbridge sprang from his chair, and rushed toward the door in a way that fairly frightened Mrs. Kent. Was he about to break in upon Jessamine Holland, and deny all, and what would be the effect upon the girl's shattered nerves?

But when he reached the door, Duke Walbridge paused suddenly, drew back and wheeled round, and then walked up and down the room two or three times, like a man distraught.

Then he came and sat down by Mrs. Kent, who was almost as much agitated as himself. He was deadly pale. From her heart the woman pitied him.

“Mrs. Kent,” — speaking slowly and solemnly, —



“that there ever was an engagement betwixt Margaret Wheatley and myself, or a remote hint of one, I absolutely deny. You believe me?”

“Entirely, Mr. Walbridge.”

“My amazement and horror that any sister of mine, knowing the truth, whatever she might have desired, should have deliberately uttered such a falsehood, completely unmans me. But I shall recover myself, and then I shall search this matter to the bottom.”

His eyes blazed a moment, and Mrs. Kent thought to herself, “I would not stand in those girls’ shoes for all the world could give me.”

Soon afterward the young man took his leave, Mrs. Kent engaging not to relate one word of their conversation; and the lady and her guest parted friends for life.

Mrs. Kent was too far excited to return upstairs. She continued pacing up and down the room, muttering to herself, in a fragmentary way, “Oh! to think of it! —to think of it! My poor Jessamine! What awful wickedness! But it will all come out now!”

Duke Walbridge rode home slowly, trying to clear up his thoughts. Doubt, amazement, horror, in turns, possessed him; across all would flash sometimes a feverish, awful joy. “Had Jessamine Holland believed he was really betrothed to Margaret Wheatley, and did that account for her silence?”

Yet what must she think, in that case, of his letter?

The basest of men would hardly venture to write such to one woman, knowing he was bound to another.

It was all a mystery; but his whole soul was bent on



its solution. Still he was quite worn out with all he had just undergone, added to a week of sleepless nights and days of travel. As Duke dismounted at the barn-door, the coachman came out, and spoke to his young master. Duke had never associated the man with the matter; indeed, he had as yet shaped for himself no plan of action in this emergency; but now, with a sudden impulse, he asked, "John, you remember a letter I sent by you to Miss Holland, a couple of days before I started West."

"Yes, sir," replied John, intent on removing the saddle at that moment.

"You saw Miss Holland, — you gave the letter into her hands just as I desired you?"

"I gave the letter into her hands, sir."

John's face was turned away. His master was watching keenly. There was something not just right in the man's voice.

John turned toward the barn. Duke sprang forward, and his hand clutched the other's and there seemed in it the grip of ten giants.

"Stand still, John. Look me straight in the face now. Did any human being but yourself know about that letter?"

"Well, yes, one person did — I couldn't help it;" frightened at that white face, and the eyes that blazed out of it; frightened at the menace in the tones too.

"Who was that person?"

"I promised not to tell; but — but — don't look at me in that way, sir. It was Miss Edith. She found it out



some way. I was al'ays afraid there was something wrong at the bottom of it."

"Come into the barn, John."

The man followed meekly enough, and went through a most rigid half-hour's inquisition. John did not try to conceal anything. He dreaded that white face and those tones more than he could any possible storm of anger from Miss Edith.

So it all came out. The promise she had extorted from him at night, and the conversation which had transpired betwixt them the following day in her room, after John had received the letter and the message for Miss Holland.

"She took the letter from you, you say, John, held it up to the light a moment, and then returned it to you?" going over slowly every point of the coachman's story.

"Yes, sir. She said it was the letter. I felt mighty uncomfortable over it, anyhow;" twisting his legs about in his agitation and excitement, in a way that must have struck his young master at any other time as immensely comical.

"She said it was the letter. Now, John, I give you full warning that I am in no mood to be trifled with. If you deceive me now, or hold anything back, it will surely be the worse for you; for, if it cost me my life, I will clear up this whole thing. Did you believe that letter my sister handed back was the one I gave you?"

"I wasn't jest certin. Miss Edith's back was turned to me a minit, and it sort o' seemed to me she took up somethin' from the table. I could tell your handwritin',



too, among ten thousand. I saw it on the back of the letter you gave me. The one I took from Miss Edith was different, — a finer, smaller hand, jest like her own."

That was enough. Duke was silent a moment, because he could not speak. At last he asked quietly, "Did my sister reward you afterward?"

"She put a five-dollar bill in my hand. I'd rather given her twice as much to be clear of the whole thing. However, all I did was to tell Miss Holland I'd brought her a letter, not to say you sent it."

"That was all?"

"Ye-es, sir."

"No; there was something else. I plainly see it in your manner. I must have the whole truth, John."

"That afternoon I took your sisters — Miss Edith and Miss Gertrude — to drive, and they stopped for Miss Holland. Jest as she got into the carriage, I thought she thanked Miss Walbridge for her invitation that mornin'. That was all."

Duke Walbridge staggered like a drunken man to the window to get breath. The mystery began to clear up now; but the shock was awful. That his sisters, with whom he had grown up, whom he had loved and trusted, with whom he had been cross and merry, surly and tender, as the mood happened, — his sisters could practise a deception so deep and base on him, was like the shaking of sudden earthquakes under his feet.

There came a thought more awful still. Did his mother know, and had she countenanced, aided all this? For a moment it seemed as though some foul taint throbbed in



his blood, as though his own truth, and honor, and manhood had been blackened forever.

But he must search the thing to the bottom. He turned and looked at John, who was watching him, with his big mouth and his big light eyes wide open, with doubt and trouble.

“You may go, John. You didn’t act a brave, manly part; but your cowardice, which made you too easy a tool of others, seems about all that lies at your door. Would to God it were no worse with them !”

“Thank you, Master Duke ;” the coarse, bronze face clearing up. “It’s plagued me ever since, at times ; and I feel easier now you know it all, if I lose my place.”

But John did not fear that now.

At last Duke went up to the house. He had not met any of his family since his return, having found Mrs. Walbridge and her daughters out for the day when he reached home in the morning. He crept up to his room, threw himself down on the lounge, and tried to see the way before him.



## CHAPTER XXIV.

A HUM of voices, a storm of knocks at the door, and Duke Walbridge lifted himself up. It was quite dark in his room by this time, and he perceived that he had been asleep for several hours. It was dreadfully unromantic at such a crisis of his fate; but worn-out nature would at last assert her rights. And though Duke Walbridge had thrown himself on the lounge, conscious that the present was the most momentous period of his life, and that on the course which his own brain should shape and his own will execute, depended all his future, — its weal or woe, — conscious of all this, he had turned over and gone to sleep, like any tired animal.

Still, that slumber had done for him at this crisis what no profound thoughts could; it had cleared his brain and steadied his nerves.

Meanwhile, his family, returning home, had learned with immense surprise of the young man's arrival, and his eager sisters made an assault in a body on his door, and his mother waited below, impatient as her girls to greet her boy, — only, recalling some facts, she felt uneasy about meeting his eyes.

“Come in!” shouted Duke, as soon as he was fairly



awake and took in the circumstances; and the door burst open, and the girls bounded toward their brother, whom they had not seen for a half a year.

An uproarious hugging and welcoming followed. There could be no doubt that this love was genuine which welcomed the young man back to his home. They called him "Bear," and "old Bluebeard," and all the old household names, as they clung about him, and told him that he had grown brown as an Indian and fat as an Esquimau; and in the midst of the laughter and chatter Mrs. Walbridge showed herself at the door.

"I saw that I must come to you, my boy. Your getting away from this rabble, for the present, was hopeless." And the others made way for her, and she put her arms right around the big fellow, and kissed him all over his face, telling him "how good it seemed; how glad she was to have him home again — her boy." And the tears were in her eyes.

She was his mother, — the woman that, next to one other, his heart held dearest on earth. Duke forgot all the bitter anguish with which his thoughts had surged against her that day, as he put his arm around her and returned her kisses. This was the mother-heart against which his boyhood had leaned; surely it would not be leagued against him, — it could not have sought to stab him to the death.

These faces of his sisters about him, flushed with eager joy at his return, could these ever have combined to do him a lifelong deceit and wrong? In the midst of them once more, with the family love tugging at his heart,



Duke Walbridge began to doubt even what Mrs. Kent had told him.

“Why, there’s pa!” suddenly shouted Kate.

Sure enough! There that personage stood in the door, having just returned home and learned of his son’s arrival.

“I thought I had as good a right here as the rest of ’em, Duke,” coming forward. And the two wrung each other’s hands.

“Now do just see those men,” cried Eva, “shaking hands as though they were the merest acquaintances! Men are the oddest creatures!”

“Well, what is one to do?” laughed her father, who, there was no doubt, felt quite as pleased as the rest to have his son home again. “It’s well to have somebody amongst such a tribe of madcap girls, with enough of his senses left to keep the house from turning straight into bedlam.”

“Well, you might at least *kiss* each other,” stoutly rejoined the youngest daughter.

“No objections to that. ’Tisn’t the first time, Duke,” replied the father; and the two, to the infinite amusement of the others, performed that function, as well as the grizzled beard and the brown one permitted.

“Eva! Eva!” mildly admonished the mother, as that young girl executed a gymnastic feat, as much resembling a summersault as anything else.

“Well, mamma, I can’t help it. Indeed, you must excuse me, but I am so glad because Duke has returned home.” And again she was kissing him, and telling him



he had grown such a bronze old Hercules off there in the territories.

In due time the family went down to dinner. Mrs. Walbridge, wishing that her eldest daughter was at home at this juncture, and uncertain whether his father's wishes or his friend's death had been the impelling motive of Duke's return, did not allude to Ross Holland.

The father, straightforward and practical, blundered right into the matter.

"Horrible thing, — loss of that steamer, Duke; awful pity, to think of that brave young fellow's going down in that way! Felt sorry enough for you, when I heard it."

"It was the heaviest blow I ever had in my life, sir. I don't like to talk much about it now; but you know he was my dearest friend."

"Yes, I know — pity! pity!" repeated his father.

"It seemed almost like losing somebody right out of our own family," put in Eva. "And then poor Miss Jessamine, — it's almost killed her."

"I know it has," answered Duke, shortly, as one does, when words hurt.

"*How* do you know, Duke?" continued Eva, and there was silence at the table.

"Because I saw her this afternoon."

"You *did*, — you saw Miss Holland?" continued the girl, and everybody listened.

A little start on his mother's side — a little swift glance went up between her and Gertrude. Duke did not seem to be looking, but he saw for all that.



“Yes; I went directly to the Kents. I suppose you all knew I would do that. I saw Miss Holland only a few moments, long enough to perceive, however, what work the last few weeks have made with her.”

“Oh, it was dreadful!” continued the girl. “I thought it must certainly kill her at first. I’m afraid it will yet.”

Mrs. Walbridge breathed freer. It was evident that nothing had transpired in the interview betwixt her son and Miss Holland, which could give her any uneasiness, and his father’s business would make it necessary for Duke to return to New York in a few days. To do the woman justice, too, she had undergone some keenly remorseful pangs, which were quite a new experience with Mrs. Walbridge, and which made her just now think less of any intrigue than of Jessamine Holland’s sorrow.

“We all pitied her from our hearts, Duke — poor child! We all pitied you, too, knowing how you would feel!”

“Yes, mother — girls, only don’t talk about it now.”

Of course no more was said, but they did not rally into their old spirits, and it seemed as though the shadow of Ross’ death fell around that supper-table.

“Gertrude,” said Duke, during the evening, “come and take a little walk in the hall with me.”

That promenade was an old habit of his. Nobody thought anything strange of the invitation. Gertrude accepted her brother’s arm with alacrity.

“Why didn’t you ask me too?” inquired Eva, betwixt a pout and a smile.

“Because your turn is coming a little later, Pussy.”



For a while, the brother and sister paced back and forth, talking over events that had happened to both during his absence. If each was a little grave, that was natural enough after the talk about Duke's friend.

At the end of the hall there was a small side-room, hardly larger than an alcove; a quiet place, with no especial use, where books and flowers were always scattered about, and where anybody was secure from interruption. Duke drew his sister in here; placed her in an arm-chair, where the light shone full upon her face. He sat down on a divan near her.

"Gertrude,"—leaning his head on his hand, and speaking very low and deliberately,—“did you ever give Jessamine Holland any reason to suppose that an engagement existed between Margaret Wheatley and myself?”

Gertrude started, and stared at her brother as though a poniard had transfixed her; her lips paled. “What do you know—who has been telling you anything?” she stammered.

“No matter about that now; I am asking what *you* know, and, Gertrude, I must have the truth;” his jaw settling grimly now. Gertrude's first start had betrayed her. Edith would have acted the part better.

“I—I don't want to say anything about it—I wish you would not ask me, Duke;” her face getting paler.

“Gertrude Walbridge, do you think I am a fool, to be put off in that fashion? It is my right to ask you. Answer my question!”

His face, his voice, fairly frightened her. She still stammered, and tried to prevaricate; but there her brother



stood, grim as fate, and with that look which it was hopeless to defy. At last she broke out, "I never told *Jessamine Holland* that you were engaged to *Margaret Wheatley*," — which you will remember was the truth, reader.

"Never told her so, *Gertrude*? Did you ever know of anybody else who said this; and did you sit quietly by and not lift your voice to contradict so absolute a lie?"

"I couldn't help it, *Duke*. There were reasons;" growing white and red by turns.

"Reasons for such a foul deception as that! Again, do you take me for a fool, *Gertrude Walbridge*?"

The blaze in his eyes made her tremble. Poor *Gertrude*! The whole affair wore such a different aspect now, as she sat there alone face to face with her brother, from the one it had under *Edith's* soft handling, which made the younger girl believe, for the time, that the deception was justifiable. If her elder sister was there, she would face *Duke* out. *Gertrude* made a faint attempt at *Edith's* old sophistries.

"We always hoped and expected you and *Margaret* would be engaged to each other. You knew she liked you, and, under the circumstances, it seemed almost your duty to have her."

"As for my duty, I am the one to decide that. You knew, for I had told you so, that I had no thought of ever asking her to be my wife, and do you mean to tell me now that my conscience, my honor, are not unsoiled; that I ever gave *Margaret Wheatley* to suspect, by



word or act of mine, that I could be more to her than I frankly avowed to you all?"

Gertrude was struck dumb. If Edith were only there! She lost all self-possession.

"I will go straight to mamma with all this. I will not answer another of your questions, Duke," she cried, and, springing up, rushed toward the door.

A hand of iron griped the girl, and brought her back and set her down helplessly in the chair. She burst into tears, half of fright, half of anger.

Tears from a woman always melted Duke. They touched him now; but, for all that, he was resolute. He sat down by Gertrude's side, and brought all his persuasiveness, and all the magnetism of his will, to bear on her. She was afraid both of her mother and of Edith; but her brother proved to her that he was substantially acquainted with the facts.

At last the whole came out, dragged from most unwilling lips, it is true; but Duke did not leave Gertrude until she related all that Edith had said during that memorable ride with Miss Holland, and the passive share which she herself had borne in the intrigue.

Duke, although inexpressibly shocked, managed to control himself. It was easy enough to see that Gertrude had been overruled by a stronger will than her own, and that her part was altogether secondary in the affair. It was a great deal, too, to find out, as he did, during the conversation, what sort of excuse and justification his sisters could make to themselves for a plot so nefarious that Duke was almost stunned with horror



when he thought that it had been concocted and executed in the bosom of his own family.

He knew then how men and women feel when they learn first that some awful crime lies on the soul of one whom they have loved and cherished more than their own lives. Gertrude had made a clean breast of all she knew; and it was clear, from her reply to some guarded questions about a letter of his to Miss Holland, that Gertrude, at least, knew nothing about one.

“What letter, Duke? I never heard of one; neither, I am sure, did Edith.”

He was glad enough to divert her thoughts from that topic.

“And our mother knew and countenanced all that Edith did? She was willing—she desired Miss Holland to believe that lie?”

A slow amazement and pain in his voice, that hurt Gertrude. She was naturally anxious to justify her mother.

“Mamma did not expect Edith would go so far, and was truly unhappy about it, especially since Miss Holland had her great trouble; but you know how fond she always was of Margaret, and how she had set her heart on your coming together.”

Duke would not say it to the daughter of her mother, but the thought flashed sternly across him: “She had set her heart on the banker’s half million!” He knew, and perhaps, in her heart, Gertrude did.

“Now I have told you all, and you will forgive me, Duke?” coming back to him after she had started to



leave the room, for the blaze had gone down in his eyes, and there was something in his look which troubled her.

Of course there could be but one answer to that; but there was something in the way in which he kissed her, which hurt Gertrude more than the look, and made her feel that her brother's faith in her had had a terrible shock. With this feeling she burst into her mother's room. "O mamma, Duke has found out all about that affair of Miss Holland's. Somebody has told him; and I have had the most dreadful time downstairs for the last hour; he would not let me go until I had told all."

Mrs. Walbridge was thunderstruck. She tried to speak, but her limbs shook and her face was white.

"Why did you not come to me at once, Gertrude?" she managed to say.

"I tried to; but there was no getting away from him, mamma." And then, looking up, they saw Duke at the door.

"Gertrude, I must see mamma all alone now."

And the girl went out, and the mother and the son were alone together.

It was the most awful hour of Mrs. Walbridge's life. Its anguish and shame will haunt her memory to the day of her death. She stood face to face with her sin, and face to face with her son, and had to own the deception she had countenanced, the subterfuge she had connived at. This woman, whose life had been built on conventionalities and respectabilities, felt the foundations breaking up beneath her. For the first time in her life, Mrs.



Walbridge lost faith in herself. Then, too, the humiliation was doubly keen and bitter, because it came to her through the one being whom she loved a little better than anything on earth; whose love and reverence, too, were a little dearer to her heart than that of any other, though it were her husband or her daughters.

And now Duke must learn that his faith in her had been betrayed, that his own mother had deceived him, and helped him to believe a lie, — a lie, too, which must work disappointment and mistake for all his future. This was the truth that went down into the core of the woman's love and pride.

Edith was not there to aid her mother, and Mrs. Walbridge was too cruelly agitated and perplexed to attempt many subterfuges. The whole affair, in which she had borne a conspicuous, if a somewhat passive, part, took to her now some new complexion and proportions.

Yet, as Duke had dealt kindly with his sister, so he did with his mother; more tenderly, even, because he pitied her more. Still, for all that, he was resolute to sift the matter to the bottom. It is true, Mrs. Walbridge made feeble attempts to assert her dignity, to maintain that her relations to her son shielded her from the duty of replying to his questions.

"You forget, Duke, that I am your mother; you question me as though I were some witness at the bar, whom you had a right to interrogate without mercy," she sobbed, half hysterical, half indignant.

"No, mother, it is precisely because you are my mother that I came to you, before going to any other



source, to know the whole truth. Do not compel me to seek it elsewhere. Let me have it from your own lips."

And at last he drew it all out. Mrs. Walbridge would have been glad to shield Edith, but the facts were against her.

The night wore on. Duke walked the room, his face livid, his mother in her chair, white as himself, as the ugly truths one by one dragged themselves up to the light. The search for his letter, the reading it, the plot to destroy it, after substituting another in its stead, with the dreadful lie on top of all, so completely horrified the young man, that his wrath was held in check.

"Edith did not mean to wrong you, Duke; she had your best happiness in view; but she, with the rest of us, was driven frantic by the thought that, after all our cherished plans and hopes, we were to lose Margaret, whom we had grown to regard as our daughter and sister. It was not, either, that we disliked Miss Holland. And since the poor girl's trouble came upon her, I have been a wretched woman, thinking of all these miserable things. We were bewildered by the suddenness of our discovery of your feelings, and driven to desperate means to prevent a consummation of our worst fears. It seemed, too, at the time, Duke, that we were doing what was for your own best good."

"My best good! To sacrifice my life in that way — to separate me by so cruel a deception from the woman I loved, and marry me to one whom I did not!" a strife between indignation and pain in his voice.

Mrs. Walbridge murmured something about Margaret.



Duke stopped before her. "Mother, be frank with your own soul. It is not Margaret, but Margaret's money, that lies at the bottom of all this wrong and misery."

Mrs. Walbridge was dumb. At another time she would have denied this, but at that moment the truth struck home. Remorse and pain had made her conscience sensitive. She did not answer one word. She only sobbed to herself. And again Duke remembered she was his mother, and pitied her.

At last, but that was long after midnight, there was no more to tell. How nearly the plot had succeeded, Duke Walbridge of all the world only knew. Sudden heats of anger had come upon him, and shaken or hardened his voice; then pity had melted him as he looked at his mother; then horror at the cruel wrong which would have blighted his life.

When it was all over, he sat still a while, and then he rose up and went over to his mother, and the tears were in his eyes, and his voice sounded unutterably mournful: "Mother, if I have forgotten at any time to-night the respect which I owe you, forgive me. It has been very hard to bear, but hardest of all has been the thought that the mother, whom I loved and trusted as I think few sons have ever done, has deceived and betrayed her boy, — could have so easily sacrificed the happiness of his life; it is very hard to believe it yet. The pain is fresh now. I shall try to forgive it — but — but we will not say any more to-night."

Mrs. Walbridge writhed a moment, and buried her



face in her hands. The gentle, cruel words wounded so deeply, because of their truth.

In her humiliation, the woman wished she could have died and been buried before she had driven her son to speak thus to her. But she did not reply ; she only sobbed in her chair. And Duke took her in his arms, and laid her tenderly on the lounge, and kissed her, and left her.

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There was no sleep for Duke that night. I think there was as little for his mother. Sometimes a wild joy flashed through him as he remembered that Jessamine Holland had never heard of his letter ; that the prospect of his suit was as fair now, as though that had never been written !

But his joy even came and went in swift, hot throbs. Everything seemed unreal to him after what he had learned to-night ; underneath all, a passion of wrath against that elder sister who had been the prime mover in the whole intrigue. Her brain had plotted, and her arts had achieved, the whole. For his mother and Gertrude there was much to pity and excuse ; but for Edith, could he ever feel again that she was his sister ? He saw her stealing into his room, and reading his letter ; he saw her wheedling it out of the coachman, and quietly transferring it to the table ; a little later he saw her fair, exultant face bending over the flames where she had thrown it. He closed his eyes with a sudden loathing. It seemed to him that he never wanted to look on that face again to the day of his death !



So the cold dawn at last came into his room, and again he fell into a heavy slumber that lasted for hours.

Mrs. Walbridge was not at breakfast that morning. She had had a miserable, nervous night, her husband said, and enjoined upon his daughters not to "bother their mother with any of their nonsense that day."

It was quite evident that the gentleman had not the remotest suspicion of all that had transpired the night before. Mason Walbridge's acuteness lay in other directions.

After breakfast Duke went up to his mother's room. She had just arisen, and the girl had brought in a letter with her mistress' coffee.

Duke saw at once that his mother was excited. She soon placed the letter in his hands. It proved to be one from Mrs. Ashburn, and it announced her niece's engagement to a young man, of whom Margaret had sometimes spoken at their house, as a great favorite in her set; handsome, accomplished, the very beau-ideal of an elegant, courtly gentleman. Mrs. Ashburn had quite opened her heart to her old friend. "I had hoped, dear Hester," she wrote, "that your boy and my girl would unite our families in one; but things do not usually turn out in this life after our pet hopes and fancies; I learned that long ago. Margaret seems very happy in her choice, and her father is satisfied. The young man himself has all those qualities which would be likely to win the favor of a woman, as he is handsome, cultivated, agreeable, and his wealth, family, and position, are all we could desire for our darling."



Duke laid down the letter, and the mother and son looked at each other.

"It is best as it is, Duke," she said. "Your way is open now, and as Jessamine Holland is your choice, go and win her."

"Ah, mother, I should like to hear you say it in a different tone from that!"

"Sons are not apt to consult their mothers in choosing their wives; but I will be just at last, Duke. I know of no woman who is so well suited to you; none, certainly, whom I believe more worthy to be your wife than the one you have chosen. I frankly avow that my prejudices have stood in the way of any very cordial feeling toward her on my part; still, that was not Miss Holland's fault — and — and" — a flush stole into the lady's cheeks — "I should prefer that my future daughter-in-law should not be acquainted with some facts, which must of necessity be explained to her. That again is not her fault, Duke. You will at least remember, however deeply you may feel for her wrongs, that it is your mother and sisters whom you are to accuse."

Duke comprehended his mother's feeling, and took in all the pain of his own position. It was a humiliation as keen as possible for the proud woman, to reflect that her son could not press his suit until the maiden of his wooing had first learned how darkly his family had plotted against both.

"Mother, I think you know you can trust me, and — and Jessamine Holland does not know the worst. She never will."



Mrs. Walbridge understood that he alluded to the letter which had been destroyed. Had the girl known that, and Mrs. Walbridge's share in its destruction, it seemed to that lady she could never have looked her in the face — not even as Duke's wife.

Afterward she went on to say, that, as things had turned out, she was glad to hear of Margaret's engagement.

She little guessed what share her son had borne in promoting that, and no human being ever suspected that only one little moment had stood between Duke Walbridge's asking Margaret Wheatley to be his wife.



## CHAPTER XXV.

THE following day, Duke Walbridge went over to the Kents again. A night and a day had calmed and strengthened him. If the hopes did not sing about his heart like flocks of spring-birds, as they had sung one day long ago, it was not strange. The blackness of death had fallen upon Jessamine Holland since that time, and for himself he had passed through such awful shocks of knowledge, and loss, and grief, that the old, high bounding heart of love was slower now.

Duke Walbridge was not going over to the Kents with any purpose beyond that of making a friendly call on Miss Holland. He found the family out, Mrs. Kent and Mrs. Bray having gone to drive, and Jessamine received him by herself, — a little smile flickering out of her lips and eyes as she welcomed him, that was like the old Jessamine Holland, only the smile had such a background of sadness.

“To-morrow,” she said, with considerable animation, “they have promised that I shall accompany them in their drive. It is such a very long time since I was last out doors. It seems as though it must be years when I look back.”



Her voice faltering, just as her lips did, over the last words. He knew what she was thinking of; but this morning neither spoke of Ross. Their hearts were too full of him.

“Your friends here, Miss Jessamine, give me nothing to do. I came over here, intending to allure you, if possible, into a short drive with me to-morrow, and here, as usual, I find myself anticipated.”

“You are all very good to me. I am not worth so much trouble,” she said, sorrowfully, to herself, as those are apt to feel whom some terrible blow has prostrated.

Duke Walbridge did not reply. He had been wondering all the way over to the Kents whether there would ever come a day on which he should be able to tell Jessamine Holland that he loved her, when such a humiliating confession must form the preface of his story. What would she, the high-souled, true-hearted girl feel, when she came to know that foul deceit in which his mother had shared? Would not the scorn in those bright, sorrowful, rebuking eyes, make his lips dumb when his turn came to plead his own cause? But as he looked at her that morning, the pale, sweet face, with its loneliness, its youth, its sorrow, for the moment swept off every other thought, and, with a sudden impulse, not stopping to take counsel of judgment or discretion, Duke said, “I read a letter yesterday morning, which contained some tidings that very much surprised me; I think they would you, also, Miss Holland.”

“What was it, — pleasant news?” She had come to feel that all sudden news must be sad.



“Yes; on the whole, I suppose engagements usually are.”

“I suppose so;” and then the poor child remembered one engagement that she had once learned suddenly, and that was anything else but “pleasant” to her.

Perhaps the shadow of this thought drifted into her face, for the young man hastened to say, “This letter was from Mrs. Ashburn to my mother, and announced the engagement of her niece, Margaret Wheatley, with one of the numerous suitors for her hand;” his words slow and distinct, watching the effect of every one.

Jessamine Holland started, full of quick life now. Her eyes stared and strained at him; her breath came in swift pants. “How thoroughly they had deceived her!” thought Duke, a wave of indignation rushing over his soul. That she was dreadfully agitated, and, in her present weak state, scarcely able to control herself, was evident enough.

“Margaret Wheatley engaged?” she said, slowly, putting her hand to her forehead. “I thought — I thought — they told me —” then she turned and looked at him, something wild, hunted, appealing in her look, that he could not bear.

“I know what they told you;” his voice low and shaken. “As God hears me, there was not one word of truth in it from beginning to end, Jessamine Holland!”

He did not dare to look in her face. But he felt her shake all over, and then there came a little kind of choked, gasping cry from her lips; very low, but it hurt him cruelly. Then her face went down in her hands. He waited



a moment for her to speak. She could not for her life; and at last, feeling that the time was come, and still with his face turned away from her, he told his story, — how the heart of his family had long been set upon Margaret Wheatley, and he — stammering there, and blushing like a bashful girl; and how, at last, his sister Edith — God forgive her, for it seemed as though her brother never could — had devised a plot to utterly deceive Jessamine Holland, and dragged her younger sister into the passive part which she had taken in the matter; and how he had, at last, through Mrs. Kent's intimation, unravelled the whole foul thing, with what amazement, indignation, and grief, he left Jessamine to conceive.

She was silent, as though she had been turned to stone, while he talked; but he knew somehow that she was taking in every word; he knew, too, that such a story must be an awful shock to her native honor and truthfulness. He would not insult these by trying to smooth over the facts; and the worst she would never know. There was his letter to her. One secret Duke Walbridge must hold from Jessamine Holland to the day of his death — hold it for his mother's sake — it might be for Edith's.

She sat just as still a long time after he had finished. At last he looked up in her face. It was such a changed one, all moved, flushed, quivering with life and warmth. He was a lover — he could not help what he did next. He leaned over and touched her hand. "Jessamine," he said, "are you glad, or sorry, to know this?"

She tried to speak; but, if any words came to her, they choked in her throat. A sudden happiness swelled and



thrilled at her heart, the blushes quivered into her face, she looked at him shyly, and a smile, her own little, childlike smile, brimming with joy and sweetness, came and nestled about her mouth.

The sight mastered him. He leaned over the hand he held. "Jessamine, you must understand why it was that my sister descended to take all this sin on her soul — that she went, with this dreadful lie on her lips, to the one woman whom she thought stood betwixt Margaret Wheatley and me."

"O Duke!" It was a little, deprecating cry. She did not know what she said.

More than that low cry would not have held him back now, with his soul at flood tide.

"I knew that you could not fail to understand what I meant that last morning that we passed together. When I came over to see you a day later, it was to place my fate in your hands; and your refusal to see me convinced me that you had taken that most delicate, if most deadly, way of letting me know that my suit was in vain. I cannot talk of that time; its bitterness only taught me what you had become to me, and — it drove me out West at last."

"O Duke!" A low cry like the other, but a little tenderness quivering through it.

He heard it. "Jessamine, if you had never heard that lie of Edith's, and I had come and asked you that afternoon what was in my heart, should you have let me go away as I did?"

A little sobbing kind of sigh, but through it a tremulous



whisper, that she did not mean to speak, but it breathed up from her heart to her lips.

“No, Duke.”

Half an hour later, Mrs. Kent and Mrs. Bray returned from their ride. Was that the face they had left behind? Was that the white, settled thing they had been watching for the last month, fearing that the life was fading out of it? Now a very morning radiance of joy possessed it. The life, and sparkle, and happiness, that shone in the quivering smile, in the shining eyes, seemed like a fresh miracle.

Hannah Bray, with her blunt, honest homeliness, which at this time served better than anything finer, burst right out with, “What has happened to you, my child?”

And Jessamine — you must remember how joy as well as sorrow strains heart and nerve, and the one came for her close on the other — burst into tears. “I am so happy, so happy!” she sobbed.

Then the two women looked at Duke, and understood.

Mrs. Bray, the worn face all broken up with feeling, burst out, “Come, young man, I see you’ve had her ear to yourself quite long enough this morning. You’d better go now, and leave her to get a little quiet. I know her of old, and about how much she can stand.”

Duke sprang up with alacrity. “I will go at once; but you must make up your mind that I have some rights now, and intend to assert them by coming very soon again.”

Mrs. Kent met him in the hall. He grasped both her hands. “O my friend, how shall I thank you for what



you did to me that day ! I am the most indebted, as I am the very happiest of men ! ”

“ I always felt there was something wrong at the bottom,” said the joyful little woman, fairly clapping her hands. “ I wish I could tell you, Mr. Walbridge, how sincerely glad I am — how much I congratulate you ! ”

They went into the parlor together, and there — it was the lady’s right to know — he had to tell her the story he had told her friend. It was a second humiliation ; it dashed somewhat the brimming cup of his joy.

“ Duke,” said Jessamine, timidly, the next day, when he sat by her side, — “ Duke, there is one question I want to ask you.”

Really, I do not like to write the reply. It was a lover’s, and might not look so well on paper as some other things, even if they were not a whit more sensible. “ Did your mother know — what — what was said to me that day in our ride ? ”

He bent his head, as reeds by rivers do when sudden storms of wind whirl over them. She was half sorry she had asked him, when she saw his pain ; but he had to tell the truth, softening and excusing wherever he could, and thinking all the time of how much lay behind.

Then Jessamine Holland spoke like herself. “ Ah, Duke, I forgot everything else yesterday, in the great happiness of knowing what I was to you ; but I could never enter a family where I was unwelcome as sister and daughter. I could never be happy, feeling that I was the stranger who had brought pain and disappointment into their midst.”



Duke tried to turn it off with a jest. "Will you doom me to perpetual old bachelorhood? There would be no hope for Margaret and me now, if you did not exist."

There was no denying the force of this argument, yet that fact did not lessen the repugnance which Jessamine's pride and self-respect both felt at the prospect of entering a family who had plotted so long and deeply to keep her out of it. She knew, too, although she did not say it, knew just as well as Duke did, what lay at the bottom of their preference for Margaret Wheatley.

Duke could not blame her. I think, in his secret soul, he honored Jessamine Holland for the feeling she avowed. It could not interfere with their new-found happiness, with the blissful knowledge that they two loved each other. That was a lifelong truth, before which the memory of all sorrows passed away, "as memories of storms that go down beyond horizons of summer days."

Even the thought of Ross could hardly cross with a shadow that present joy. It seemed to his sister that his voice came to her out of the dark and the distance, bidding her be happy in the love of his best friend. And she was, and the life and the youth came back to her face once more, and the spring-tides into her soul.

One day Mrs. Walbridge came to her son, and said, "Duke, I see that it has prospered with you. Tell me all."

He had waited for his mother to speak first. And now Duke told her all, even of Jessamine's resolve never to force herself an unwelcome member into his family.

That resolve broke down the last prejudice which Mrs



Walbridge had cherished against Jessamine Holland. She had her part to do now, and she did it well. She rode over to the Kents, and she took Jessamine Holland in her arms and kissed her. "Come to us, my child, for Duke's sake, and so we shall know you have forgiven us all; and that will be much."

The ladies parted closer friends than they had ever been before. One night had made a great difference with Mrs. Walbridge. There might not be any change to the world, but secretly she would never be just the woman she had been before that time.

Edith learned first, through her mother, of the utter failure of her *chef d'œuvre* of intrigue, and the dreadful recoil on herself. Whatever she felt, the front she carried was worthy, as I said, the women of the Court of Catharine of Medici, the pupil of Machiavel.

"My plot has utterly miscarried, and I accept the facts," she wrote. "Duke, for whose sake I took so much pains, will probably curse me. That is usually the way, when people go too far to serve their friends. What is it Lady Waldermar says: —

" ' We all do fail and lie,  
More or less — and I'm sorry — which is all  
Expected from us when we fail the most,  
And go to church to own it.' "

"Duke will have his country lassie now, and as I suppose Heaven intended them for each other, I wish him joy of her; and good as I have proved myself at lying, perhaps he will believe me when I say I've honestly felt sorry for the girl sometimes, since she lost her brother, and



wished I'd not tried to interfere with Providence, even when I thought half a million of dollars hung upon a few foolish lies; for — let us be honest, mamma — that was really at the bottom with us all. Jessamine Holland is as fit a wife for Duke as any young woman could possibly be who is poor. I can see the blackness of his face as he reads that; but sinners such as he holds me are desperate, and a few words more or less make no difference."

The letter closed with the announcement of Edith's intention to accompany a party of friends to Havana to pass the winter. She drew very vivid pictures of gayeties and splendors to come; but, with all her effrontery, the girl shrank from the thought of meeting the face of her brother, or of Jessamine Holland, for a while. And her mother's approval of the journey, which in the Walbridge family meant that of most of the others, settled the matter.



## CHAPTER XXVI.

A COUPLE of weeks had passed. One morning Duke Walbridge sat alone in his father's private office, thinking the thoughts of a young man, whose life and future are no longer solely his own. He was full of hope, strength, ardor, now; of dreams, work, and help for others. The moods and the discords seemed to have passed out of his life in these last weeks, which had brimmed with happiness for him, for Jessamine also.

Each was wise enough to speak little of what was painful in the past; but the present joy measured for both the depth of the old anguish. Once or twice, in some little pause, when she sat by his side, Jessamine had caught hold of Duke's arm with a sudden movement of terror: "O Duke, I thought once I had lost you, — lost you forever for this world!"

Those words and that movement showed him all she had suffered; and that thought always hardened his heart toward Edith, toward his mother even, as the memory of his own anguish never did.

But, even though some shadows must tremble among Jessamine's joy, still, how great the blessedness was, you had only to look into her face to know. The pale pink



glow had come to her rounded cheeks, and her eyes shone out of their old, bright depths.

As for Mrs. Kent, she was as happy as an impulsive, warm-hearted, sympathetic young matron could possibly be over the happiness of her dearest friend. And Mrs. Bray had won a promise from Duke to bring Jessamine up to her old home for at least a week next summer, and returned herself, the true, warm heart, under the homely face, content for her foster-child.

At his own home everything went smoothly. Eva was fairly wild with joy over the prospect of having Jessamine Holland for a sister-in-law, and, hanging about her brother as usual, said, "I always knew she was the right one for you, Duke. Oh, I am so glad!"

As for Gertrude and Kate, their dislike had been merely stimulated by others, and as soon as Margaret Wheatley's engagement had transpired, the girls, who really were attached to Jessamine Holland, were quite willing Duke should follow his own tastes.

So, indeed, was his father, who had a lurking feeling that his son had been badly treated by the banker's daughter, and endeavored to console what he fancied must be his wife's keen disappointment.

"The money was a good thing, no doubt, my dear, but I dare say the boy is well quit of it. I've often observed that men who marry a fortune seldom get much comfort from it."

"Mr. Walbridge," said his wife, wincing under this talk, "I am sorry to find that you think me governed



entirely by mercenary motives. If our son is happy, I am satisfied."

There was an astonishing discrepancy betwixt this talk and some that Mr. Walbridge had listened to a long time ago in that very room. He was silent, however, thinking that his wife's pride and affection had both been wounded by Margaret's conduct, and that this fact had affected the change in her sentiments. So little did the man suspect the drama that had gone on in his own household. That very day his eldest daughter had sailed for Cuba, — a trip that, despite all her mother's influence, he had never cordially approved.

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"Walbridge!"

Not a loud voice, just behind him, as Duke sat there at his father's desk, but one which seemed to echo away down from distant slopes of the years. He sprang up and turned around. There the speaker stood, a rather stout, youngish man, with a face darkly browned by foreign suns, a thick beard.

Duke stared, and for the moment did not recognize the stranger. But, as the latter stretched out both his hands, some strong feeling came into his eyes.

The voice, the eyes, flashed over Duke; his face turned white as a dying man's; he leaned back against the wall. "Ross Holland! Ross Holland!" staring at the figure, as he would upon a risen ghost. "O my God!"

Duke spoke that name not irreverently; but as we all may, turning in the human anguish of an awful joy or



sorrow to the eternal Love and Power, greater than ourselves.

“Yes, it is I, whole and sound; although I came close enough to making a meal for the fish in the Indian Sea. Ah, Walbridge! don’t stare at me like that; give me a welcome, old fellow.”

Then, at last, — what would Eva have said at such a scene between two men? — Duke actually took the stout figure in his arms and hugged and kissed it; but all he could say, was, the tears running over his cheeks, “O Ross Holland! Ross Holland!”

Young Holland was as much overcome as his friend. He returned the hugging in earnest. “Old fellow, — it’s good to see you!” he sobbed.

“But I thought you were dead!” cried Duke, holding the other out at arm’s-length, and laughing and crying together, and not even ashamed of himself.

“So did I,” answered Ross. “But you see I wasn’t. I’m good for a strong tussle yet with fate.”

“And Jessamine. It will kill her, Ross, — the joy will kill her!”

“I was afraid of that. When we got into New York I learned the shipwreck had gone over the country; so I didn’t telegraph, but I took the next train, and made a rush from the depot to find you, and to decide how I should make myself known to her.”

“Sit down a moment, my dear fellow, so my eyes can look at you while we make our plans.”

But it was impossible to sit still. Both were excited, and one so hungry for a sight of his sister. In a few



words the young man related the main facts of his shipwreck. The vessel went to pieces in the terrific storm. For a day and two nights Ross had clung to a raft, swift, black waves going over and slowly drowning the life out of him; torturing thirst and gnawing hunger making him almost long to die; and at last his memory went down in blank unconsciousness. There were three others on the raft with himself, and all made up their minds that they saw the sun rise for the last time, when it came up and found them still on the raft the second morning. But before noon a brig came in sight. Signals brought her to their help. When Ross was lifted into the vessel, the men doubted whether it were not a dead man's body whom they took on board. But prompt and diligent care soon brought signs of life, and Ross woke up to find he was in the world once more.

The brig which had rescued Ross and his companions was a French vessel from China, bound for Havre. They had a slow, stormy passage. Ross reached port just in time to seize the next steamer for America, so no letters could be despatched in advance of himself. Late the night before he had landed on his native shores.

"Those awful days and nights on the raft in that black sea! They seemed longer than all the rest of my life!" and Ross shuddered.

"Poor fellow!" Duke's hand on his shoulder.

"I thought of Jessamine, and what she would do without me! And then I thought of you, and of that last promise you made me. I could trust you entirely, and



yet do your best you could not quite be her brother, Duke." There were tears in his eyes.

"No;" a smile coming into his face. "I tried that Ross, and it wouldn't go. I found that Jessamine Holland could not be my sister."

"Why not? What do you mean?" asked Ross, quite bewildered.

"I mean that you and I are to be brothers, Ross."

In a moment the young man understood. It was the happiest hour of Ross's life. They wrung each other's hands until both shoulders ached.

"There is nothing in the world could have given me so much joy," said Ross, over and over. "Is it so?"

"Ask Jessamine, if you doubt my word," laughed Duke.

"Come, we must start this minute. There's no time to be lost; only, Duke, tell me, how did she bear the tidings when they came?"

"It well-nigh killed her, Ross!"

"I knew it would — my poor darling!"

"I was out West at the time. I hurried straight back. That was before — I found her looking as though she would soon go in search of you. Ah, Ross, I had learned long ago what she could not be to me, by the measure of what she could! One day, not meaning to tell her, sitting by her side, it all came out. Since then she has grown herself again."

And that was all Ross ever knew of the long darkness which had fallen into the lives of both, and of the plot of which each had so long been the victim.



It was settled that Duke should ride out to the Kents with his friend, and in some measure, if possible, prepare Jessamine for what was to come. So the lover and brother, equally impatient, sprang into a carriage and drove away.

It was a fortunate circumstance that Mrs. Kent happened to be in the front hall that morning as Duke Walbridge entered it. The lady came forward to greet him and his friend, fancying, from his bronzed complexion, that the latter was some old travelling companion of young Walbridge's.

As soon as the lady had ushered her guests into the parlor, Duke took her hand, saying, "Can you bear a great and joyful surprise, my dear Mrs. Kent?"

"I hope so;" looking from one gentleman to the other in amazement.

"Then let me introduce to you now this gentleman, — my friend, and Jessamine's brother, Mr. Ross Holland."

At that name she turned white, and staggered against a chair. Both the gentlemen had no easy time to calm her, for amazement and joy threw her almost into hysterics.

But at last she could hold Ross Holland's hand in her own, and gaze at the brown, bearded face through her tears. Then she started and cried, "There is Jessamine. If it should come too suddenly, it must kill her." And she glanced toward the door in a fright.

"Where is she?" whispered Duke.

"Upstairs, in the sitting-room. But she is liable to run down any moment. Somebody must go to her at once."



"I will," answered Duke. "You stay here, Ross, with Mrs. Kent, and I will try and prepare her."

Great was Jessamine Holland's amazement to see her friend enter the sitting-room unannounced.

"You see I am quite at home here;" taking a seat by her, and explaining how he had met Mrs. Kent in the hall, and she had sent him upstairs, where he would find Miss Holland.

Then he went on to say, "Now I am certain you are curious to know what can have brought me over here at this unconscionable hour of the morning."

"A little, I confess. Are you ready to tell me?"

"Nothing bad, at least."

"I saw that by your face."

But his heart beat so loud at his throat, that he actually had to stop here and go to talking of other matters.

At last he made a fresh attempt. "Jessamine, you and I do not talk of—of our brother."

"No;" the sweetness of her face going down in sorrow. "There is no need, when we always think of him."

"There is a question I would like to ask you about him."

"Don't be afraid, Duke."

"Has it ever, in the remotest way, occurred to you that—that there was a slight chance he might be alive?"

He felt her start and quiver all over.

"Ross alive! Duke!"



He took her hand. "Be quiet, now, my dear girl. I only mean to say that I have sometimes entertained some hopes. You know that in a shipwreck people are often saved, and come to light long after they are given over for dead. Ross was a wonderful swimmer, and could keep above water where most men would go down."

"But why have you never told me this before, Duke?"

"I feared to awaken false hopes, Jessamine; but I have just learned some facts which give me a hope —"

She was off her feet in an instant, clutching at his arm, the wild, hungry look in her eyes.

"A hope that Ross is living! You know something, Duke — I see it in your face!"

She was trembling all over.

"There, dear child, be calm, or I shall not dare go on."

She sat down then; and though she shook in every limb, and her lips were very white, she said, "I will. Go on."

It was hard for Duke, with those eyes on his face, thinking who was below stairs all the while; but he managed to say, "I saw a person who was on the shipwrecked vessel. He knew Ross; and it was his opinion that he did not go down with the others."

"O my God, my God!" in just the way Duke had said it before that morning.

She wrung her hands. The tears poured down her cheeks. Then her hungry eyes went up to Duke's face again. "Where is this person? There is something more than you tell me, Duke!"



"If you would not look at me, and tremble like this, Jessamine! It frightens me."

"There, now, tell me." Ashen white she put both her hands in his. "Tell me," she said again.

"I have seen the person. I have brought him here — and — and —"

Not his words, but something in his face, struck her. "Had he seen Ross?" she cried out, sharply.

And Duke did not dare answer, and then she knew.

In an instant, and with a shriek that reached the listening people below, she tore herself away from him. She rushed along the stairs, and Duke, following after, shouted to her to come back.

"Run! run!" screamed Mrs. Kent to Ross.

But it was too late. Before he could turn, Jessamine bounded into the room. She saw the brown, bearded stranger who stood there, and he saw the little sister whom he had left six long years before, in the shadow of Hannah Bray's veranda; and the face, a little riper and maturer, wore still the old charm and sweetness which he had carried in his heart over sounding seas, and amid hot Indian jungles, in the silences of the desert and amid the thick swarms of foreign cities, — the face that had been a guardian angel about him, keeping his thoughts sweet and his life pure amid fierce temptations; the face that always seemed close by him in his prayer at night, — the old boyhood's prayer for himself and her; — the face that he had not forgotten when he cried to God out of the great peril of the deep. At the sight of it now, turned up to him in its white agitation, the young



man's long self-control utterly broke down. He put out his arms with a cry: "O Jessamine, my sister!"

One long, sobbing shriek of passionate doubt and joy, and she sank into her brother's arms, and was gathered up a white heap to his heart.

The joy did not kill her. Three or four evenings later, the three, with Mr. and Mrs. Kent, were all assembled in the parlor, as happy a company as one could often find together in this world, — the happiest face of all, that of Jessamine Holland, which three of the four actually thought the most beautiful thing in the world! They had been talking in a light, merry vein, as people do whose hearts brim over with deep feeling. Jessamine sat before the two young men, feasting her never-sated eyes on her brother.

"You dear boy, those Indian suns have made dreadful work with your complexion!" she said.

"It was the sea, more than the sun. But it makes very little difference. When a fellow comes home, after half-a-dozen years' absence, and finds somebody else has stepped as snugly into his shoes as you have into mine, Walbridge, he isn't apt to feel very much the loss of his complexion. Mine, at the best, was never much to boast of."

"Yes, it was. Ask Hannah Bray," replied Jessamine, who was laughing, and glowing a good deal over her brother's personal remarks.

Ross, who always enjoyed a joke mercilessly, pursued the subject. "Ah, little sister, do you remember how often you have promised never to love anybody so well as



your brother ; and do you remember, too, the cottage we were to have ? Alas, for the frailty of a fellow's hopes ! For six years, under blazing Indian suns, that cottage was before me, — the goal of all my future. It went down into my dreams at night, and rose with me in the morning, and I've come home at last to find it was all moonshine."

"No, it was not," answered Duke, coming to Jessamine's rescue. "The cottage is a fixed fact in the future, veranda and balconies, shrubberies and all. And Ross Holland is to be the most important member of the household under its roof."

Then Jessamine broke out, playfully : "How in the world can I ever have the care of two such big fellows on my hands ? It's an awful responsibility."

"I'm coming to help you, dear, as often as I can coax my husband into granting me leave of absence," added Mrs. Kent.

"If that's all, you will see her very often," rejoined the gentleman ; "for she has a way of coaxing me into everything she wants."

"It strikes me, at this moment," continued Ross, "that the very best thing I can do is to follow Jessamine's example. Ah, Walbridge, if that little sister of yours, whose withered flowers I kept all these years for her sake and yours, were only a little older ! But I can wait."

"I wish you joy of the waiting, Holland ; and there is just one man in the world to whom I could willingly give up my little Eva. She has been able to talk of nothing in the world but yourself since your return ;



and once she sorrowed over you as did only Jessamine and I. You are all invited there to-morrow to dinner, as you know."

So the talk went, gayly oftenest, and sometimes grave; and Jessamine, listening, thought there was one thing more in the world, that would make her exquisitely glad, and that was, if her little favorite could ever be what Duke had said. She had never thought of this before; but she knew Ross and Eva thoroughly, and it struck her now how singularly, in many respects, they were adapted to each other.

In the midst of all these things, company called on the host and hostess; so the three young people were left alone together.

"Ross, you have written to Hannah Bray?"

"Yes; this morning. I promised to run up for a couple of days next week, if you could possibly be prevailed on to spare me!"

"You shall take me along, Ross. Dear, faithful old heart! How it will bound at the sight of you!"

Duke was silent a long time, looking from the sister to the brother; at last Ross said, "Well, Walbridge, what are you thinking?"

"Shall I tell him, Jessamine?" getting up and going to the girl, and laying his hand on her shoulder.

"Yes."

"I was thinking of these words, and, setting them apart from all others, of the tender, and beautiful, and sacred meanings which ought to lie in them for every man, 'The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me!'"



## CHAPTER XXVII.

AMID all the happiness which brimmed over the golden rim of these days for Duke Walbridge, he was haunted by the thought of the banker's young under-clerk, whose crime had interposed between himself and that one moment which Duke could hardly contemplate without a shudder, thinking always more of Jessamine than of himself.

It was singular, and yet hardly to be wondered at, when one thinks how his fate in the banker's splendid parlor, with the beautiful daughter beaming at his side, had hung on an instant, that Duke Walbridge, being the man he was, felt a profound sympathy for that young boy, whose evil deed had wrought his own great happiness. It came upon him, too, sometimes, with awful force, how Edith's plot, rash and bold as it was wicked, and impossible to succeed as he should have deemed it in another's case, had barely failed of a triumphant issue in his own. He saw, too, how the fatal words, having once been spoken, and he Margaret Wheatley's accepted and acknowledged lover, there was not the smallest probability that either Jessamine or himself would ever have learned the plot, of which each had been made the dupe.



Mrs. Walbridge and her elder daughters must have been haunted at times by an under consciousness, anything but pleasant, of the means which they had employed to reach the golden goal of Margaret Wheatley's hand; but a confession, which would only overwhelm them with shame and involve cruel wrong to three others when too late to repair it, would never have entered their minds.

There were plenty of arguments, too, which would furnish more or less self-justification to all concerned in bringing about Duke's marriage.

As for his own share in the matter, he saw clearly enough how that must have gone.

Once Margaret Wheatley's affianced husband, conscience and honor, as well as his own peace of mind, would have influenced him to make the best of the facts; to forget as far as possible his love and his disappointment.

All this would have been cordially promoted by his family; and the knowledge of the delight which his choice afforded to all those whom he loved best could not have been without its effect upon him.

His affections were vital things; but a brave soul always girds itself to front the inevitable. Duke Walbridge was not the man to go through life miserable, because a woman whom he loved had rejected him; but, for all that, the pain must have gone to the quick, and its secret state would have driven him desperate, — impelled him to consummate matters at once; and his family, dreading the possibility of awkward developments, would have been equally desirous of the happy finale. "All for Duke's



good," each would have told the other, and more or less believed it.

Before that time there would, no doubt, have been the splendid wedding, the glitter and gorgeousness, the array of bridal gifts; and Duke Walbridge would have been the envied husband of the banker's beautiful heiress.

Always at the end of this shining perspective, which haunted Duke's soul in solitary hours of the night and day, there stood a vague, young, mournful figure, the one which had interposed between him and that moment in which he was ready for the fatal leap,— "the figure of a criminal; but his good angel, for all that," Duke thought.

So his curiosity and interest grew; side by side with them in his thought and heart, a yearning desire to serve in some way, the unhappy stranger of whom he knew so little and so much.

The result was, that one morning Duke made up his mind to go to New York for a day or two. What he should do, when he got there, he left circumstances to determine.

He found on the train Ross Holland, who came up to the Kents every spare moment that he had. The ladies were there also, having driven over with him to the train. Great was the surprise of the trio on seeing Duke enter, duly equipped with carpet-bag and overcoat.

He explained briefly that some business was taking him off, for a day or two, to the city; and a few moments of merry talk and jest ensued before the bell rang, and the adieux had to be spoken.



In the midst of these, as the gentleman handed the ladies from the cars, a thought struck Jessamine that she was blessed above most women in such a brother, and such a lover, and then a swift memory leaped upon her of the time, not long ago, when both were lost to her.

She turned upon the young men her last smile, but she did not know that its unutterable tenderness was burdened with the awful memory at her heart, and that both brother and lover saw, as though she had spoken ; and for a long time after they resumed their seats each was silent, thinking of that look with which Jessamine had smiled her good-by.

At last the prospective brothers-in-law fell to talking, comparing notes of the different parts of the world each had seen.

Ross was full of stories of life in India, vigorous and racy. Duke wondered how the fellow had kept so alert and keen during those long years, no sign of rust in thought or wit, and at last, he said to young Holland, "I always supposed the most people could do, was to keep up life at all in that hot, sleepy peninsula ; but you seem to have been keen on the scent with books and people, as though you'd been braced up in New England all this time."

Ross laughed. "It was hard work, though, rowing against wind and tide, but I wouldn't let the helm go.

"The truth was, Walbridge, I saw what lazy, sleepy, bilious nabobs the climate turned out of the foreign residents in the course of a few years, and I said to myself, 'Young man, look sharply to what wits you've got.



Don't you go to lounging and mooning like the rest of 'em; but just stick to your books all your spare hours, as you used to in the little law-office, so that when you go back, you won't be such a "John-a-dreams," your sister will blush for you; ' and I did it through thick and thin

"As for society, there was no lack of that; rather a surfeit, you see, what with the English and American residents."

"What grit there must be in the Holland grain!" exclaimed Duke, looking affectionately at his friend, who laughed and said he should repeat "that ambiguous compliment and mixed metaphor to Jessamine."

Through all the journey, Duke felt some doubts lest he had started off on a very Quixotic errand. The whole matter to himself was one of feeling, rather than of judgment. "How would it look in the eyes of any disinterested, sensible man, like Ross here, for instance?" he wondered, a sudden impulse coming over him to tell the object of his journey to his friend, suppressing, of course, that part which concerned himself and Margaret Wheatley.

Ross, at the core of him, was one of the softest-hearted fellows in the world; but he had his theories cut and dried, and they were a young man's, and partook also of the original "setness" of his character.

His residence in India, also, had gone far to confirm his creed. He could not fail to see there a great deal of the worst side of human nature, its cowardice, baseness, vileness. Ross brought every instance to his own rule, and squared it there. He held that honor must be native



and absolute with men. If a soul slipped once, there was small hope of its getting on its feet again, and staying there.

Young Holland listened silently, losing no word of his friend's story; and when his answer came, it was partly of the heart, partly of the creed.

"You are a grand fellow, Duke, and it doesn't come easy to me to throw cold water on a generous act. But I fear it's all time and trouble thrown away. If this young fellow had had moral backbone, he wouldn't have gone down so easily.

"I've seen something of human life in the last half-dozen years, you know, and if the taint is in the blood and marrow, why, there it is — sure to come out, like any disease. Set such people on their feet, and down they'll go again, over and over — not spine enough to stand upright."

"Very likely Ross had the best of it," Duke thought. Then he remembered all he had held back from his friend, and that might have modified this reply.

In the noise and crowd of the depot where the young men parted half an hour later, Ross wished his friend "God speed," hoping the boy would prove an exception to his class; but Duke saw that Ross had very little faith in the result.

It was late in the afternoon; but young Walbridge hurried at once to the banker's office. One of the head clerks, whom the former knew, had been detained that evening. After a little brief talk on general topics, Duke managed to introduce the subject which alone interested him.



“Oh, you mean Barclay!” said the clerk, slipping his pen behind his ear. “A good-hearted, well-meaning little fellow as ever lived, but no experience, and the city proved too much for him — bad company — debts, and went down in the maelstrom; old story, you know;” and the man shook his head. “One must make examples. Paid for his crime dearly though; shut up in the Tombs all this time, awaiting his trial.”

“What! hasn’t that come off yet?” asked Duke, amazed. He had supposed the boy had long since been sentenced, and was serving out his time in the State’s Prison.

It proved, however, on further inquiry, that there had been, to use the clerk’s phrase, “some hitch in getting hold of the right witnesses,” so that the boy, after his examination, had been detained in the Tombs.

“Matters were in the right train now,” to quote the clerk again, and the trial was expected to come off the day after to-morrow.

These were substantially all the facts which Duke elicited from the clerk. He left the office resolved to call at the Tombs the next morning.

Of the two hours next day, in that bare, solitary room with its barred windows, where the young life that had miscarried itself so fatally had been imprisoned for all these months, it would almost take another book to tell fairly. Duke Walbridge and Tom Barclay know, and that is enough; but neither of these will ever be likely to say much about it.

Duke found a small, wiry youth, with pale yellow hair,



and a dawn of yellow beard on his chin; a good face enough, pale with long confinement and trouble. Whatever boldness and evil were latent there, the years would have to confirm.

A gust of pity swept over young Walbridge, which for the time bore down all the doubts and fears of his better judgment, as the two whose lines had so mysteriously crossed each other stood alone in the dark, bare, silent Tombs.

Of course the boy meant to be on his guard. His counsel, such as he had been able to employ, had warned him about that, but his solitude and loneliness had borne very heavily on him, and he had so very few friends, while Duke's personal magnetism made the impression on Tom Barclay that it did on most people.

The whole miserable story from beginning to end was gone over. It is so very common as not to possess one striking feature. The new city life, the inadequate salary, the small debts incurred here and there, the first attempts at gambling, the gains and the losses; the little debts swelling into a large aggregate, the demands of creditors, the despair and desperation, and, at last, the only door out of them, which opened so easily, and which it seemed would open so readily for the boy to return again, — the door of crime.

"If I had only died! If I had only died!" moaned the boy, rocking himself back and forth, his face in his hands.

Duke looked at the poor fellow with unutterable sympathy, yet he felt that, if there was any hope for this



boy's future, the ploughshare must go now to the roots of his life, and he must not spare for the writhing and the agony. "Had you nobody who loved you?" he asked; "no mother or sister to whom the knowledge of your crime would be worse than that of your death?"

The boy looked up; something like a gleam of joy came into the haggard face. "I had a sister," he said, "three years younger than I; she was all I had in the world, and I was her love and pride. She was a sweet, gentle, trusting little thing, and she died three months before this happened. O Ruth! Ruth! it would have killed you if you had known it!"

The next morning Duke called at the banker's office. He was by no means a stranger to the large, pleasant room, with its dark walnut panellings, and its great substantial office table, and chairs in oak and green morocco.

He found the owner here, an elderly man, with a kind of Roman head and sparse gray hair, portly, prosperous, and patronizing; a man about the age of Duke's father, and a good deal after his type. Young Walbridge was always certain of a cordial welcome at the banker's. After the two had gone around the circle of personal and family topics, Duke, fearing some interruption, for time was precious on both sides now, at once opened his errand.

At the first mention of Tom Barclay's name the elder gentleman knit his gray brows and stroked his tufts of whiskers in anything but an encouraging manner, for his former office-boy. Yet he listened courteously, but Duke saw, wholly sceptical, to the end.

Yet the elder was not in the worst sense a hard-hearted



man. He had, it is true, no profound faith in human nature, his experience not tending to develop that; but that he was just and honorable everybody who had dealings with the banker admitted.

“Duke,”—when the younger paused,—“you are my friend, and so I’d gladly oblige you by letting this young scamp go scot-free; but in the end it would be doing you and him no favor.

“You are a soft-hearted fellow, and young Barclay has come round you with the pathetic dodge. You cannot make rotten timber sound, sir. When you’ve lived as long as I have, you’ll find that out. I honor the motive which has sent you here on the fellow’s behalf; but he did a dishonest act with eyes wide open, and there is no use in bolstering him up. He’ll be sure to go down again, and we owe it to society to let the law take the fangs out of him.”

Duke had foreseen this line of argument. That it was largely true he was ready to admit, and having conceded so much to the riper wisdom of his friend, he proceeded with his own view of the case.

Of course it would be quite impossible to go over with that two hours’ talk between the elderly man and the younger one. Had Duke pleaded Tom Barclay’s cause less eloquently, or had he been at bottom less a favorite with the banker, he would never have carried his point.

There was some force in Duke’s reasoning, that the long time in which the boy had been in the Tombs awaiting his trial, was, in itself, no small punishment. “At any rate, my dear sir,” Duke entreated, “give me a



chance to try the boy. It is, as you say, an experiment, and it may prove a worthless one. I will risk it, not for the boy's sake, but for my own. Give me a chance for his life."

"Well, Duke, my boy, you've put it in the only way to carry weight with me; but the young scoundrel deserves no pity. Such a barefaced crime too! How in the world did he happen to get hold of you?"

Duke wavered a moment, and then thought the truth was best, so far as he had told it to Ross Holland.

"The facts are, I was at your house on the evening of the boy's arrest, and had the whole story from Margaret's lips. It has haunted me ever since, and yesterday I learned, to my surprise, that this boy, still in the Tombs, awaited his trial. I visited him there, for the first and only time, yesterday morning."

The banker was more astonished than ever. "Had the story from Margaret," he repeated. "Was that all you knew of him?"

"That was all, Mr. Wheatley."

The banker mused a moment, and then he spoke: "Well, Duke, you are a good fellow, and, for your sake, I will make a fool of myself. The boy shall have another chance; but mind what I say now, — he will abuse it by getting into another scrape."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, sir! If young Barclay makes a second slip, and I feel by no means secure of him, you will, at least, remember that for one day you made me a happy man."

And the two men grasped hands warmly.



Afterward there were details to be arranged. Duke had learned all the broad bearings of Thomas Barclay's case. There was one witness whose testimony would be vital in the matter, and without which his crime could not be brought home to the prisoner.

The banker could with ease secure the absence of this witness, and with good counsel on his side the acquittal of Tom Barclay before judge and jury would be assured.

"Capital fellow, that Duke Walbridge!" murmured the banker, as the young man left the office; "should have preferred him vastly to any other young man for a son-in-law; but fathers and daughters' choices of husbands do not usually correspond;" fancying Margaret must have had the matter entirely in her own hands.

"Ah, my dear sir, if it had not been for this Tom Barclay, shut up in the Tombs, you would for a dead certainty have been my father-in-law," thought Duke to himself, as he left the office. "What would you say if you knew it was gratitude for my escape from that honor which led me to take all this trouble?"

Duke felt almost, for the moment, as though he had taken some underhand advantage of the old man's friendship; but, after all, his conscience was clean, and with this reflection he started at once in quest of a lawyer.

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Six months have passed. It is just at that time when May and June meet together, and the earth has adorned herself with the fresh glory of leaves and blossoms, and



the very air is solemn with incense, and the sky above is holy with smile and blessing over the bridal of spring and summer.

In the little alcove parlor at Mrs. Kent's, Jessamine Holland sits alone with the sunny afternoon, and tells herself that at this very time to-morrow she will be Jessamine Holland no longer.

The fair, delicate face shines with a great internal happiness; but it is not the bright joyfulness of one who has never been calmed and steadied by a great sorrow.

If her thoughts go back into the years, they fall among the heavy shadows of her youth, and the radiant horizons of her future seem just now to fairly dazzle and blind her; and the present, touched by both past and future, seems like a soft twilight, where she likes best to linger for this hour.

"How good it is to be alone," she thinks, "after all these days of busy stir and excitement over the wedding preparations!" Through all, that dear Mrs. Kent, who had her share in bringing the whole about, has been in her element, taking everything into her own hands, and arranging things mostly her own way.

In one case, however, Jessamine has had hers. Mrs. Kent wanted to indulge herself in an ambitious wedding; but Jessamine pleaded so hard for a quiet, unpretending bridal, that the former had to yield, and consent to no guests outside of the Walbridge family and Mr. and Mrs. Bray. Jessamine looks around the pleasant room, and the still tears gather in her eyes, remembering the time when she first sat there so long ago. Under this roof, the



heaviest storms of her life have blackened over her, and its most radiant dawns have arisen.

She thinks, too, of the Father to whose hands she has tried to cling through the heaviest hours, and the happiest. "Why, Jessamine!" says a voice at the low, open window, and, turning, she sees Duke Walbridge bound into the room. "I come like a thief and a robber," he laughs, and then, catching sight of the tears in her eyes, adds gravely enough, "What do they mean, Jessamine?"

Her smile comes out and answers him, and Duke does not need any words beyond that.

They sit down for the next hour and talk, partly like young lovers, and partly like a sensible man and woman, who have sounded something of the depths of human life.

They talk of the little cottage they are to have, a couple of miles out of town. Duke has been with the architect that day, and seen the drawings, and it will be ready for them in the autumn; bay-windows, verandas, library, and all; — a bobolink's nest, the Walbridges laughingly call it.

Duke is to go into business with his father; the old man needs his son's younger muscle and brain.

"I had a rare opening in New York the last time I was there," Duke says, "and if I had gone into it and given soul and body to the work, I might have built up a grand fortune in time, and perhaps set you in a palace on the Hudson, or somewhere; but you and I do not care for the money and the splendor, Jessamine."

"Oh, no, Duke; no more than I did for poor Mrs. Kent's grand wedding."

Then the talk slips off to nearer things, to the bridal



trip to Niagara and the mountains, and Duke thinks, although he does not say so, how those beautiful brown eyes will drink in with fresh amazement and delight that great world they have never seen.

There is a little pause, and then she turns to him suddenly. "I cannot tell you, Duke, with how much pleasure I have dwelt on the thought that I shall see Tom Barclay here to-morrow. Poor fellow! I cannot help feeling that the presence of the young human soul which you rescued from sin and shame will be like a visible blessing of God upon our bridal!"

"Poor Tom will owe as much to Ross as to me, Jessamine, in the long run," said Duke. "I must admit, when that brother of ours first proposed finding the boy a situation in the India house, I was half doubtful over his offer.

"If the boy turned out for the worse, after all, I should blame myself for allowing him to be saddled on Ross; but all my objections went for nothing. You know Ross was present at the trial, and at the interview betwixt Tom and me, after the acquittal. That was enough. In Tom Barclay's case, at least, all Ross' theories about moral backbone have gone to the winds!"

"He holds to the theories yet, with his native mulishness," laughed Jessamine; "he only insists that Tom Barclay is an exception to the rule of criminals."

"Ross gives a most favorable report of Tom's diligence and integrity," continued Duke. "I believe the repentance was genuine in that case. By-the-by, he was quite overcome with his invitation for to-morrow."



“Was he? It is singular how the thought of him haunts me to-day. How glad I am that he is to be here to-morrow,” said Jessamine, half to herself. Duke looked at her a moment, and an impulse came upon him to tell her the mysterious share which Tom Barclay had borne in that day’s happiness, for both of them.

The first words had almost reached his lips, when he paused.

The history of that evening with Margaret Wheatley could not fail to impress Jessamine deeply, and renew with painful vividness, just at the time she was to enter his family, Jessamine’s sense of the share which they had borne in separating himself and her.

The whole story, however it might interest, could not fail to be more or less a shock to her, bringing back, with awful force, the misery of days and months which it was best she should forget, if possible, in the joy of her bridal. When the years had widened behind them, he might dare to tell her the story, but it was too near and too vital now.

Out, on the veranda, voices and laughter broke suddenly into his thoughts, and, in a moment, Mrs. Kent and Ross and Eva broke in upon them, the young man having driven the girl over from town, and come upon the lady in her grounds, and the three were in those high spirits which seem to befit the eve of a bridal.

“Ah, you dear things!” burst out the girl, on catching sight of the two. “We’ve been searching all over the grounds for you. Don’t you think, Duke, mamma has had another letter from Edith, and her party travelled so



slowly, that it will now be impossible for her to get here in time to-morrow. Isn't it aggravating?

"I expected nothing else from their slow rate of moving."

Eva fancied her brother was too keenly disappointed to say more, and never suspected that both Jessamine and himself were relieved at the thought that the fair, proud face would not show itself in their midst to-morrow.

Duke had never forgiven his sister the wrong she had done him. He wondered sometimes, if he should ever be Christian enough to do it.

"Miss Eva," interposed Mrs. Kent, who was fluttering about in a state of excited enjoyment all this time, "I find that a mysterious package, which has cost me intense anxiety, has just arrived. I have an instinct that it contains a dress, which Miss Jessamine will wear to-morrow. I want you to help me unfold it, and then that demure young lady is to walk upstairs and try it on."

"With all my heart," answered Eva, and nodding and laughing toward her brother and Jessamine, she hurried away.

"I forgot to mention to you, Duke," said Ross, after some other talk, "that I met Mr. Wheatley on Broadway, day before yesterday. He stopped me, — wanted to know how Tom Barclay was getting on; and I gave him a good account of his former clerk. He expressed himself glad to hear it, but I thought he had, at least, very little confidence in any thorough reformation of the boy."

"Probably not," answered Duke. "I have always



considered the old gentleman gave me, one day, a wonderful proof of his personal regard."

"It struck me, as we parted," continued Ross, "that it was very singular Miss Wheatley manifested no interest for her father's office-boy. I think you told me you had the story first from her own lips, Walbridge. I am sure that, under the same circumstances, you would have shown no such indifference, Jessamine."

Ross' sister drew a long breath. Her native kindness was always prompt to find excuses for people's shortcomings, when she could do it honestly.

"Margaret Wheatley never had any real troubles," said the soft, earnest voice. "She is very pleasant and charming, and all that; but it seems to me we can hardly be tender and pitiful to others, until we have learned the meaning of sorrow for ourselves. You understand, Ross?"

"Yes; I understand, Jessamine," he said, gravely.

The brother and sister looked at each other, and in a moment their youth rose up and moved before them.

Just then Mrs. Kent's voice shouted to Jessamine, and the latter hurried away.

Ross rose up and stood by his friend. "You and I will be something more than brothers in name to-morrow, Duke."

Duke flung his arms around young Holland's neck. "Ah, my dear fellow, I little dreamed, when you dragged me out of the sea that night, you were giving me back again, not only my life, but beyond that, a brother and a wife."



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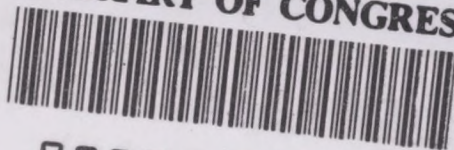








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